

APE'S FACE

a Novel

Marion L. Fox

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Prelude

THAT IS BLUE OF THE SKY: this is blue of the downs, where a thousand deep and bright-hued milkworts glow in the cropped grasses. Ring beyond ring and line across line the bowed backs of the downs shine green under the sunlight. There is not a humped back among them that does not pay tribute to the new-blown summer with a light burden of blossom. The garlanded swathings of the cold chalk, now warming in the heat, had consoled the tired feet of a certain wayfarer as he climbed from crest to crest over the terraced lynchets. Old vineyards, old plough-lands, whatever they may have been, these curving platforms carved like an amphitheatre upon the hillsides are significant, dignified, alluring. They invite, moreover, to a long repose.

Clean out of sight a lark sang. These birds are the uplifted echo of all the kind and winsome things that grow in this Wiltshire country—and just as irrelevant. Their very selflessness is our consolation. Over a hundred sacrifices, battles, sorrows, these sounds, these sights continue, the evidence of other life than the mere human. You can rest your mind on that.

The wayfaring man was not precisely a tramp. He was merely continuing the youthful game of pretending to be what you are not. He was nothing half so much food for speculation; but just a very young man, with no particular aim or business, on a walking-tour—one, moreover, who had lost his way, without greatly caring. This would not have much to do with the matter in hand except that he was to see it again in later days, and yet have lost the memory of this June afternoon, even with the recurrence of the feeling which it evoked.

He lay crouched into a fold of lynchets, they being singularly adapted to the repose of mankind. A few white cows, spotted brown, came now and again to peer at him. Also there was a green-backed beetle that crawled around his person. A ladybird settled on his hand. Otherwise there was no disturbance except the fragrance of the air.

But in that part of the downs there is no rest. A certain strife and restlessness

is in the bones of the place, so to speak. The fierce emotions of many peoples cry aloud even above the summer peace.

The long procession of clouds in passing, visible as in few other places from root to crown, is just as serene as bird or flower or sunlight. This harmoniousness is strangely marked by contrast with the sensation of conflict.

The pseudo-tramp was aware of it all: but at the moment those ancient unavailing struggles had small appeal for him. He rose up again and climbed into the sunshine out of reach of the prevailing discords. The bird was still singing, or it may have been another. A linked succession of lark-songs continued from hollow to hollow and from height to height. Along the broad saddle of the ridge the plough-land showed green with new-springing corn. Already it could ripple and eddy under breezes with that motion of stirred waters. The whole place was astir and aflicker. The least clod of earth, the smallest blade was a mirror to the sun: the living lustre of green growth reflected it on every side.

A man passing through this transparency of radiance showed himself dense and black, and for that reason almost lifeless, along the road which cut across the first wayfarer's path at right angles. The latter, having completely lost his bearings, was anxious to accost the one human being in this wilderness.

He hastened his steps, shouting to the man at the same moment. His voice sounded extraordinarily small and meaningless across the radiant spaces. In response the man upon the roadway halted, waiting for the wayfarer to come abreast of him. On asking the nearest way to Shaftesbury he was answered in a half-educated voice, wholly free from any touch of Wiltshire dialect. The man himself wore clothes of an uncompromisingly town-bred cut, ill-according with the countryside. His face, cast in a somewhat sober and even morose design of feature and expression, seemed to brighten at the stranger's appearance.

'You're a stranger to these parts, sir?' he asked, standing still to survey his companion with a sort of curious satisfaction. The other noticed the extreme solidity of the man's figure, the square honesty of his face, and a certain wise shrewdness traced in lines about his eyes.

‘I am walking from Amesbury to Shaftesbury,’ the wayfarer said. ‘I did not take much notice of my road and here I am, though where that is I do not know.’

‘And not much the worse off for that,’ returned the man. ‘I wish I were in your shoes and walking away from the place just the same.’

The wayfarer looked a trifle astonished at the man’s vehemence, for there was a concentrated fury of hatred underlying his words.

‘You live here?’ he asked the man.

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘but I come from Buckinghamshire,’ and at that his face brightened and then gloomed again; it had extraordinarily benevolent in the brighter moment. ‘Do you know that county, sir, by any chance?’

Armstrong, for such was the wayfarer’s name, confessed his ignorance regretfully, and at that the man’s face became yet more dejected.

‘A fine county, sir,’ said he; ‘I was born and bred there, and Providence send I die there.’

‘You do not care so much for this place then?’ asked Armstrong.

The man looked at him in scorn, silently; and whilst he remained speechless, Armstrong seemed to see the vision of a different, better county pass across the man’s mind—a kindly place of low-bosomed, well-watered and well-wooded, lapped generously in good earth. As he watched, the man’s stern face twitched, his eyes filled with tears.

‘Those downs,’ he cried, and shook his fist at them. ‘Curse them!’ he said, and in his voice were both anger and fear. He turned from Armstrong without another word, and vanished through a gate into a plantation at a curve of the road below.

Armstrong stood looking at the bright shining spaces that lay all about him. A few moments passed. The downs shimmered and the sun rose higher, glowed more resplendently. The translucence of the place became emphasised.

Again there rose a dark figure out of the radiance—one more dense shape of humanity. It came running beside the vivid green of the new corn, a little black creature, a small girl-child in a black frock. She cried out as she ran, the tears oozing in large drops from wide, frightened eyes. A wizened, dark thing she was; old and terribly young at the same time.

‘Mr gardener,’ she screamed, ‘Mr gardener!’ and her terrified child’s shriek echoed down to the plantation. She looked over her shoulder, as for something in pursuit. Far and near Armstrong could see nothing moving on the whole face of the downs. Panting, weeping, the child passed him, swerved at sight of him, with a flicker from her wide eyes—dark against their distended whiteness—then she too vanished into the plantation.

Armstrong, aware of a curious terror amongst these sun-consecrated places, passed down into the winding road which leads to Shaftesbury.

Twenty-eight years pass.

I

Ape’s Face

I DON’T FEAR THE DARK.’ The words echoed upon Armstrong out of the blueness of nightfall, early descended over the countryside; then the iron park-gates clanged portentously behind the carriage in which he sat, the carriage door was banged to abruptly with an inrush of cold night air, and he was left alone in the slow-moving vehicle.

‘That’s all right,’ he said to himself, settling comfortably down amongst the somewhat worn cushions, and lowering one of the windows, the strap coming away in his hand as he did so. For the last half-hour he had sacrificed his

feelings on the altar of politeness, and they had come to the point of snapping, much as the strap had done: perpetual strain upon material none too solid shows this result. Armstrong was no boor, he assured himself that he was no boor, he reassured himself on this point, and then dismissed it from his mind. A scrupulous irritation refused to be thus easily assuaged. That scrupulousness was like a dog on a hot scent, it would not be called back once on the track. It had served him well in his career, helped him to success, so, recognising some kind of grateful debt, he left the scruple to this hunter's instinct. It began at the moment when he had emerged on to the platform of Down End station, under a sky mottled with clouds and sprinkled with stars, bereft of porters, luggage, passengers—everything in fact which seems to denote a station, or suggest the motive for a train. Here there appeared to be nothing but the presence of night and wind. However, a porter did at length emerge from the shadows, gathered up his baggage, and having watched the last orange sparks from the engine burn themselves into darkness, crossed the line with Armstrong meekly following. At the other side of the station-offices a brougham waited. By the light of the solitary lamp Armstrong noticed the disconsolate droop of the horse's head, and the coachman nodding on the box behind. There was a certain forlornness in the equipage, stranded alone in the midst of shadows, which reminded him forcibly of Napoleon's coach at Madame Tussaud's—a long-forgotten relic that once held infinite possibilities.

Upon a vague form moving inside the vehicle, he had discovered it to be already occupied by a woman; and being inured to this kind of doubtful surprise he ensconced himself beside her with some formal banality of fearing to have kept her waiting. (Her entire form being plunged in shadow he could frame no idea of age or appearance.) The woman replied drily that her train had arrived from the opposite direction some twenty minutes before, and consequently she expected to be kept waiting. The reassurance was couched in so unbenevolent a form as to diminish the sources of conversation.

Armstrong, considering within himself that perhaps she was young and shy, and that shyness sometimes took upon itself shapes to startle or dismay, tried to assume the benevolence denied him. He entered upon a mildly humorous description of some late fellow-passengers, discoursed gallantly for five

minutes on the humours of travelling in general, and then finding his companion as unresponsive as at the commencement of his efforts, relapsed into a discomfited truism and fell silent.

‘I wonder you travel at all,’ said the abrupt voice beside him, deep and ever so little husky, obliterating traces of either youth or age.

‘I hope you don’t take my remarks quite seriously,’ he had rejoined.

She gave a curious, small laugh that rasped as it came. ‘Oh no,’ she said,

‘but I’m no use at small-talk myself.’

‘Indeed,’ Armstrong had returned, feeling he had rolled a heavy weight uphill for nothing; the brougham toiled as laboriously on through the shining lanes, bordered with thick hedges in which the wind made low twittering sounds. The country, so far as could be seen under racing clouds, rolled gently away on their left to a darker line on the horizon suggesting woodland.

‘You know this country well, I suppose?’ he suggested presently with a determined sense of duty, leaving no stone unturned.

‘I suppose so,’ the woman rejoined, ‘I’ve passed most of my life here.

Perhaps you would like to know who I am?’ Here she laughed again. Armstrong felt inclined to tell her not to trouble. ‘I’m Josephine Delane-Morton, and it’s my father you are coming to stay with.’

Armstrong had suppressed a groan.

‘It was very good of Mr Delane-Morton to invite me,’ he said; ‘when I asked permission to read the collection of Elizabethan letters in his possession, I fully intended lodging in the village.’

‘I do not know what papa thought when he got your letter—I was away at the time—but I expect he is jubilant at the idea of talking to you about them all.’

There was a dryness in her tone that suggested infinite contempt of the matter in hand. ‘I suppose you are a great authority on that kind of thing?’

she added.

‘It depends upon what you call an authority,’ he had answered.

‘Oh, some one who studies in books and rooms with other people who do the same,’ she rejoined.

‘Well,’ Armstrong conceded, feeling inwardly truculent, ‘I must confess to having done so now and then.’

‘Naturally,’ she said. There had ensued a silence which no one tried to break for some time, whilst the wheels squirted mud and water in succulent manner upon the roadside grasses. The silence lasted a long while, when suddenly the woman gave a deep sigh and remarked: ‘I ought still to be in Italy.’

Armstrong had repressed an inclination to make no response, but, after an inward struggle, vouchsafed a passably interested ‘Indeed’, which she did not seem to require. Whereupon silence had again intervened; whereupon the brougham pulled up at a lodge and some iron gates; whereupon he was frustrated in another laudable effort by his companion leaping quickly out and shouting in more gentle accents than hitherto: ‘I shall walk up, I don’t fear the dark.’ He was left alone as before described. His punctilio satisfied also, he now turned his entire attention to more pleasing pursuits.

Perhaps it were as well to say here that Armstrong’s name is to be found amongst the list of worthies in *Who’s Who*, but with more foundation, it may be, in the truth that posterity will echo, than some of his associates possess.

Much of his work in historical biography will survive the test of time with equanimity as standards on their subjects. It is no easy thing to put old and well-known figures in a light as truthful as new, so perhaps this that he had done gained him a well-earned fame though no popularity. For that matter he was not one of those who work with one eye on the public, and that the most widely opened, since his books were written for seekers and scholars like himself.

At the moment he was wandering along one of the by-paths of antiquity, after a figure little known, but suggestive to those who had caught glimpses of him

behind others more outstanding—an Elizabethan gentleman of some repute amongst his contemporaries for learning, swordsmanship, and a certain curious book on the immortality of the soul—now only found in musty corners of second-hand book-shops, and read by lovers of the remote or strange. It seemed that Mr Delane-Morton owned some of this Elizabethan's letters and manuscript writings, inherited or acquired along with the house to which Armstrong now found himself travelling. Mr Delane-Morton had written words to that effect in the correspondence pages of the *Spectator*; and Armstrong, though not by nature one of that periodical's most diligent readers, had chanced upon the name. Delane-Morton, Burton Hall, Wiltshire—such was the address. He had written a suave if formal reply to Armstrong's letter of enquiry, proffering an invitation for a fortnight's stay to the 'eminent biographer' early in the month of December. Armstrong accepted three nights from the 20th of that month. And so things come about.

Armstrong knew little or nothing of the country beyond the fact that it lay on the more distant verge of Salisbury Plain, that the railway did not approach it within six or seven miles, and that none of his acquaintance who professed knowledge of the country seemed to have any knowledge of it.

Hence all the more pleasure in plunging into the obscure. A singularity of temperament, a natural distaste for the polite restrictions of visiting, would have made him hesitate to intrude so long upon strangers. But again the hunting instinct had gripped him, and gripped him forcibly.

There was little enough to be seen of the surroundings to the house, only a drive that twisted palely amongst a line of dismembered elms jagged and tortured by the winds. The drive, on taking one more than usually erratic turn westward, disclosed a density of blackness humped against the sky which now looked white by contrast; the trees which stood between it and him seemed to shrink and shrivel in a moment like veins in a skeleton leaf, until he became aware through them of the vast leviathan-like sweep of the downs. They rose above the flatter grass-lands with no compromise of slope or gradual descent, but like ramparts of a castle, like the old cliffs of the ancient sea-shore that they were, they looked beetling down across the night and the country, unbroken, unbending. The light, gathered about their rounded outlines at the summit, spread down a little way, showing in the gloom how

they curved forward in a horse-shoe shape around a kind of bay or long drained-off lakelet, then ended in a pointed spur of land to curve back again in one long ridge that vanished out of sight. There was a freshening of the cold air, an intensifying of cloud spaces that unexpectedly became apparent, as if the ocean had suddenly disclosed itself to view; all the immensities of Nature seemed to call to one another and rush together with a soundlessness and suddenness that was all the more forceful.

The drive continued parallel with the long ridge, the trees falling away on the left-hand side, to group themselves in a thick clump to the right. A few twinkling lights began to make themselves visible low down along the ridge, walls seemed to form themselves upon the broken slope, and in another moment the brougham had drawn up at the door of a house. So mingled was it with the shadow from the slope behind, so planted upon the declining curve, that it seemed as much a natural growth upon the side of the down as any conformation originating from less artificial agencies.

As Armstrong stood waiting upon the doorstep he felt that pre-historic man might, in just such a fashion, have scooped himself some cave-dwelling under shelter of the protecting hills. The door, opening, disclosed a dark cavity almost as obscure as the subterranean entrance to a cave itself. This somewhat dismal impression, however, soon removed itself from Armstrong's mind as he followed the man-servant across the polished boards of the hall, to be presently ushered into a room cheerfully lighted by flaring lamps and a blazing fire. The shock of sheer banality which the room afforded was almost a relief after the impressions gathered from outside the place; the focus of vision—mental and conventional—adjusted itself once more to ordinary limits.

He had scarcely time to realise the presence of a pink-faced, corpulent man of riper middle age, when this worthy hastened from the hearth-rug in a storm of mellifluous welcome—a warm south-westerly breeze rather—that somewhat deprived Armstrong of speech. Personalities fell about him like rain-drops from a shaken bough, irradiated by the glow of superlative adjectives. If he had long got past the age of self-consciousness he might perhaps have winced at the onslaught. However, presently finding himself piloted into the safe haven of a tea-table, at which there sat an old lay, he found time to

contemplate the scene.

The old lady was introduced as ‘my sister Ellen’; but Armstrong had barely time to range her in his mind amongst the Rembrandtesque than ‘my son Godfrey’ was thrust forward, with a less prompt mention of ‘my youngest boy,’ his Christian name omitted. Godfrey advanced from the opposite side of the tea-table at his aunt’s right hand with a welcoming smile, that somehow reminded Armstrong of a girl’s greeting. The young man was so very much too handsome. The youngest boy, on the other hand, who seemed to be supporting himself on one leg against the mantel-piece, though unsuccessfully, made an uncertain effort towards Armstrong, scowled a little, emitted a sound of a sort, and finally produced a hand out of his jacket pocket which he extended in half-hearted fashion. Armstrong recollected the fleeting impression of having entered upon a silence at the first moment, in which this boy had been standing amidst a circle of his relatives. The scowl on the boy’s face redeemed it from being even more beautiful than his brother’s. He appeared to resent Armstrong’s appearance—‘one more of those confounded idiots’, his expression seemed to say. Then he withdrew again to his corner like a dog to its kennel, whilst Godfrey ran around with tea-cups and the sugar-basin.

‘Dear Godfrey,’ asked the old lady in a soft voice, ‘pray ask Mr Armstrong if he takes cream.’

‘Do you take cream, sir?’ asked Godfrey, obedient to the behest. A cheerful alacrity shone upon his fine forehead and red cheeks, there was a kindness of welcome in his large grey eyes under their finely-arched brows, and benevolence in the modelled curve of his mouth. When he made any movement of his nicely-proportioned body you thought of a well-trained acrobat; his very complexion—for such he really had—was almost as faultless as though it had come out of the ‘make-up’ box.

‘No, thanks,’ returned Armstrong.

‘Thank you, dear,’ said the old lady, smiling up at her nephew, and a kind of heavy sensation of polite thankfulness for nothing seemed immediately to pervade the room. ‘John,’ she continued, turning to her brother, ‘I wonder if Mr Armstrong has any bread and butter?’

‘Dear, dear!’ cried Mr Delane-Morton, looking round in every direction for the plate in which it was not to be found, and thus allowing time for the amiable Godfrey to forestall him. ‘Oh, there it is! or won’t you take some cake?’ as his son performed the act of offering the plate by proxy. ‘I expect you know good china when you see it,’ he continued; ‘that is old Worcester, specially designed for the Mortons in the year seventeen hundred and . . .’ he rolled out the date upon his tongue much as if he were reading the text of a sermon from the pulpit, relishing the sound and watching to see its effect upon his audience. ‘It has always been used for honoured guests.’ His fat face smiled, there was too much flesh for any real expression to permeate from within. ‘When Chatham came to visit the Lady Ann Morton she offered her tea in those very cups. “A dish of tay,” I daresay she said,’ and he laughed, rubbing his chubby hands. ‘But really, it is very daring of me to parade my little scraps of knowledge before *you*. She was a very charming person—Lady Ann; almost too charming, you know. But there! it isn’t fair to give one’s relatives away: except that other people do it for you, if you don’t do it yourself. Still, I must say that there a few things one likes to keep strictly in the family besides china. Eh, don’t you think so?’ and he contemplated Armstrong with his head at an angle. ‘Now you yourself, for instance, how would you like it if I were to say to you—by the way, are you related to the Armstrongs of Gilknockie?’

Armstrong shook his head.

‘What, not the Gilnockie Armstrongs? Oh, well, the collateral branch, I suppose, that crossed the Border in the early seventeenth century and remained on our side in the neighbourhood of Carlisle. Didn’t one of them marry into the Percy family? Yes, now let me see. Ellen!’ here he drew his sister into the 10

discussion and the two together chanted a kind of antiphon upon the theme of the Armstrong cum Percy pedigree. It was really an amazing feat of memory to watch them following innumerable Johns and Georges, Janes, Elizabeths, and Matildas, with offspring or without, down to the tenth generation at the present moment residing in various parts of England at houses named and specified. Aunt Ellen was the champion; for when Mr Delane-Morton came to a full-stop, whether from want of memory or breath, she continued in

soliloquy, finally turning her eyes upon Armstrong smilingly.

A helpless feeling of incompetence at the game assailed him. 'I'm so sorry,' he said, 'but I can't even claim them as cousins four times removed. I don't even know where my grandfather came from.'

The old lady looked still more benign; a something suspicious which had lurked in her dark eyes before now cleared instantly, the lines of reserve in her wrinkled face took on a fresh pattern of protectiveness.

'Never mind,' she seemed to say, 'we will not try to think any the worse of you for that. You will feel quite at home presently even with us.' Aloud she said: 'Oh, some people are so careless, my dear Mr Armstrong, I believe they would forget their own fathers and mothers if they could. Not that I mean to imply that *you* would,' and she laid a little thin brown hand on his arm. If one of Rembrandt's ancient dames could have stepped out of her picture and touched him, Armstrong would have recognised her as Aunt Ellen. The firelight fell upon the rich folds of her dark dress, caught the thick gold chain on her neck, and reddened the shadows among the white frills of her cap.

The dark, sunken eyes were still bright and keen, sparkling in that mesh of pale wrinkles which was her face, like jewels in a tangle of dusty cobwebs.

The rest of her was so placid compared with those active eyes. When she was not dispensing the tea, her hands with their transparent skin and slender fingers lay quietly clasped upon her knee over a delicate handkerchief. She did not even knit, which of all womanly occupations has most the air of rest.

A few little tight white curls upon her forehead lay there with the same assured promise of repose, almost of watchfulness. You have thought indeed that the encircling silence, into which Armstrong felt that he had stepped upon first entering the room, emanated from her presence: not the silence of peacefulness but of something more subtle and perplexing. Almost that silence which hangs about woodland places before nightfall, and the white light along the crest of the downs which Armstrong noticed in coming up the drive. No one was ever puzzled by peacefulness: Armstrong was puzzled by the old lady's air. If the room had been panelled instead of being hung with a modern green paper, if there had been fewer brass lamps in the room, if the

curtains had been dark velvet instead of flowered chintz—if, in fact, there had been one shadow in the room Armstrong would have felt reassured.

Why should the old lady make you feel a sensation of brooding darkness when she was so gentle and the room so bright. Why?

‘But, then, Mr Armstrong, you must remember that we old people cling to the past more than you young ones. Now, I’m not trying to find out your age, you know! Some men look boys at fifty.’ And Armstrong, who had completed that age but recently, began to wonder if perhaps his hair really was less grey than he thought. ‘And we have nothing to do but sit and think of all the things we did, and said, and heard, when we were young: until at last we make a world within a world, and think it is the most real of all.’ She sighed a little with a smile. ‘But all the same, when a breath of young life from the world outside does come our way, I trust we know how to welcome it.

Forgive a prosy old woman, dear Mr Armstrong!’ The little wrinkles about her withered lips made charming shadows, as light and rumpled as butterflies’ wings. The old lady had a delightful voice too that lingered pleasantly upon the ear. ‘You must tell me presently what everyone has been doing and saying since the time when I knew it all.’

Mr Delane-Morton meanwhile was evidently tiring of his speechless rôle, and began shuffling his feet, putting down his plate and picking it up again, with other restless by-play. It seemed, however, that Aunt Ellen was no easy person to interrupt or that he himself lacked courage in the attempt. At length the boy beside the mantel-piece created a diversion by dropping his tea-spoon into the fender, as the result of trying to balance his cup and saucer in one hand whilst eating cake with the other, standing the while—a feat known only to be achieved by the most hardened of party-maniacs.

‘Tut, tut,’ clucked Mr Morton, ‘my dear Arthur, why cannot you sit down like all the rest of us? One would think you were doing your best to appear as much unlike everyone else as possible. What with these purple ties, and spotted socks, and vulgar handkerchiefs hanging out of your pockets like danger-signals!’

Godfrey smiled indulgently at the boy, who immediately subsided into a

chair.

‘By the way,’ continued the father, seizing the pause triumphantly, ‘was not Josephine to have arrived about now?’

‘Of course, John,’ returned the old lady with dignity, though it was rather apparent that the fact had escaped her notice also.

‘Your daughter got out at the lodge,’ said Armstrong, ‘in spite of my remonstrances, and insisted on walking up.’

‘So like her!’ rejoined Mr Morton with an aggrieved expression; ‘she has just returned from Italy after an illness. The doctors recommended her to be absent three months, but she has insisted upon returning one month before the time.’ This last reflection seemed to shed gloom upon the entire community for a moment. ‘But I think you would like to see your room?’ he remarked at last, and rising from his chair, Armstrong assented, and as he moved to return his cup to the tea-table, noticed a sudden draught of cold air penetrate the room: someone had opened the door.

‘Hullo, Ape’s-Face!’ said Arthur’s voice quickly.

Armstrong saw a quick contraction work across the lady’s brow; her eyes seemed to sink and darken in a moment. He turned and saw Mr Morton straightening himself from a parental embrace, and Godfrey offering a tepid hand-shake to his late but hitherto unseen companion. She stood silent in the centre of the brightly-lighted room, and looked at them all in turn.

Armstrong turned his eyes hurriedly away; she was certainly as unprepossessing as her manner—a little dark creature, with a face like that of a monkey (one of the melancholy, hollow-cheeked creatures that sit on barrel organs and stare at passers-by with alien eyes); olive-skinned, with accentuated cheek-bones and projecting brows that made the bright eyes seem all the deeper set. The hair came low upon her square set forehead, cut short at the nape of the neck, falling over her ears in heavy folds. Her hands were thrust deep into the pockets of her heavy coat, and she stood with feet firmly planted an appreciable distance apart.

‘Well, I’m back again, you see,’ she said with her curious voice, half soft, half rasping. Her glance went straight past Armstrong to the old lady and their eyes met. He could almost feel the contact, there was something so keen and forceful in their mutual expression. The younger woman threw back her head defiantly, and the shaggy hair quivered over her ears.

‘So I see,’ said Aunt Ellen softly, and added, ‘my dear. Welcome home again.’ Josephine came across and roughly took her hand. ‘Kiss me!’ said the old woman, and drew the girl towards her: there was surprising force in the gnarled hands. Armstrong could not help watching them together. The kiss was swiftly given, for the girl raised herself in a moment: but there was a curious look in her eyes as though she had been suddenly surprised and hurt.

‘Perhaps you will show Mr Armstrong his room,’ said Mr Morton, turning to Godfrey,

‘No, I will,’ interposed Arthur to Armstrong’s surprise, ‘I know which one it is.’ He turned his handsome face on Armstrong, still scowling a little, and they went out together.

As the door closed behind them Armstrong was aware of Ape’s-face looking after them, her hands thrust deep once more within her pockets.

II

The House

THEY WERE IN THE HALL AGAIN, and Arthur had stopped at the oak table, which extended the entire length of one wall, to light a candle. The only other light in the place came from the log-fire which shone persistently in the panelling as far as it could reach, kindling the gilded lettering of Latin mottoes which ran along the cornice. Two satyrs supported the mantel-piece; the oak of which they were carved glowed lustrous like satin, so that it seemed as if their skin were tanned with the warmth of southern suns. The place shone with a bronzed glow the colour of fallen beech-leaves, that somehow suggested woods and alleys in autumn.

There was a curious smell too that hung rather more hauntingly than apparent in the air, and which only fell upon the senses in passing, it was so vague: it also was reminiscent of fallen leaves—earthy, with something at once sweet and acrid. Opposite the fireplace a wide staircase of carved balustrades and shallow steps curved in wonderful lines away and up into the darkness, where figured newels, round which strange beasts and birds coiled themselves in a profusion of shape and line, rose like colossal bed-posts. It stood in an angle of the hall.

As Armstrong went up the polished steps behind the boy a wave of cold air, accumulating from shadowed places above them, seemed to sweep down the spiral with a penetrating force such as a climber might meet ascending Alpine slopes towards the snows—this in diminished values of temperature.

The boy did not talk, and Armstrong was too interested in the beauty of the carving, together with the luxury of finding himself in so complete an atmosphere of ancient times, to break the silence. It was sheer pleasure to tread step by step upon the mellowed boards which must have sounded to the footfall of so many generations. There is something in that chain of continuity which appeals to a certain sensuousness of memory. The house

spoke to him and he knew he should be obliged to listen, whatever it might say.

At the top of the stairs a carved doorway led on to a landing of pentagonal shape out of which two dark passages stretched long shadows. A round mirror caught the light of Arthur's candle on its concave surface, so that the figures of the two men appeared in it like tiny spectres of themselves. Arthur turned to the left, looking back at Armstrong over his shoulder with a smile that was a little ironical.

'I'd like to show you something,' he said.

'I'm ready for anything,' Armstrong answered, laughing.

The candle-flame wavered in a cold down-draught of air which rushed past them as they turned the corner, the pungent smell coming strongly with it. Then the candle spluttered and went out. That, however, was a matter of small importance, for Armstrong now found himself at the end of a long gallery, on one side of which hung interminable lines of portraits, on the other rows of tall mullioned windows stood full of delicately leaded panes, through which the moonlight and starlight fell, making patterns on the boards like etchings of some strange symbology. Three steps led up to a glass door, the frame work of which was half formed, half supported by two wood creatures whose shaggy legs seemed to bend under the weight.

'I can't unlock the thing tonight,' Arthur said, 'but just you look out through the window one moment.' They went up the steps together and Armstrong pressed his face close to the glass panes.

Under the moon and the stars a wide lawn ascended in ever-increasing steepness from their very feet. Away to the right a plantation of trees, vague in the darkness, swept up at an angle from one side of the house and along the slope towards the summit. From the left a white path, cut in the chalk of the downs, met the plantation at a distance of some two hundred yards from the house, passed into the diminishing shelter of the trees, and was seen to curve partly back upon itself elbow-wise—and mount the higher slopes beyond. There was an extraordinary shock of strangeness at thus finding the downs where there might only have been space or a distant view; the idea of

stepping on to earth where one might have expected air was almost as startling as stepping over the threshold of a room into a floorless abyss. Coming so into contact with the ground endowed it with an added significance, as of something at once rushing down upon the house and surging up from under its foundation like two opposing motions of one force: and the house itself seemed to lie across the bosom of the down watching for the crest of the wave to break from the summit.

The two men stood gazing out at the slopes with their faces against the glass, until their breath clouded the panes. Then they drew back, and Arthur looked at Armstrong again with an expression half ashamed, half proud.

‘It feels like being in the fore-part of a ship with a big sea on,’ said Armstrong.

‘I don’t know about that,’ the boy answered, ‘but it makes you feel queer even when you’ve known it’s been there ever since you could remember. But I like to see it surprise other people. Some of them are too dull to feel anything at all. I thought you might.’

‘Thanks,’ said Armstrong, though the grammar was somewhat vague. ‘I was!’

His capacity for replying in the fashion in which Arthur had spoken evidently made a still more pleasant impression, for the boy’s face cleared in an extraordinary way. There was a certain force in his regular features that made him more handsome than his brother, and yet in the end would spoil its outline by adding to its character.

‘Well, I suppose we must change,’ he continued in a resigned way. ‘Your room’s along here,’ and he turned back towards the landing, opening a door near the head of the stairs. Beyond there was a wide panelled room, the ceiling cut into squares and decorated with gilded stars. A man-servant was busy laying Armstrong’s clothes upon the bed.

There was a large orange-red fire in the grate and a sufficiency of candles to show the room furnished in a manner of out-of-date comfort that had still no pretension to old-fashion. It had a sort of dingy grandiloquence about it that

formed a very adequate background to the pompous butler, whose well-rounded face would naturally have been graced by the bristling whiskers of an earlier Victorian era. He retired with an unctuous gesture of self-effacement that somehow suggested an unuttered benediction.

‘What is the bishop’s name?’ Armstrong asked in an awed voice as the door closed with minute attention to noiselessness behind him.

Arthur, balancing in his favourite attitude against the mantel-piece, grinned appreciatively. Armstrong was relieved to see that he could contrive something more human than a mere smile: to Godfrey such a thing would have been impossible.

‘His name is Pym,’ he said. ‘Don’t you think we all look a bit clerical?’

Father was made for a dean and Godfrey for a pet curate. Can’t you see him wallowing in votive-offerings of knitted slippers? That’s what they want me to be, you know,’ he added with a burst, kicking the fender furiously with his heels.

‘I suppose they won’t force you,’ Armstrong rejoined.

‘I suppose not,’ he replied slowly, frowning, ‘but they might make me do it all the same.’

‘Well, that depends upon yourself, doesn’t it?’

‘I don’t know,’ he answered sullenly, giving the fender one more kick and lifting himself clear of the mantel-piece. ‘Dinner’s at eight—sharp. But I forgot, you’re an honoured guest. That’s a bit different. You can be one minute late, and father’ll still smile; two minutes and he’ll only look urbane; three minutes and he’ll forbear in silence. I haven’t seen the fourth minute, so I can’t tell you any more.’ Whereupon he went out, shutting the door with a bang.

Somehow Armstrong felt he liked the boy—he was so uncompromisingly young and natural in this house of extraordinary politeness. His surly aloofness showed perplexity at finding himself in surroundings so different

from his own nature, and an absolute inability to solve the problem. It would be likely for him to go knocking his head against the family wall for many years to come yet, Armstrong decided, as he fastened his collar before the glass and carefully tied his tie. He was fastidious in his tastes without exception.

A dinner gong presently sounded in the distance, and Armstrong, remembering Arthur's warning, proceeded quickly to the drawing-room, much as he felt tempted to linger on the stairs. The whole family, with the exception of Aunt Ellen, was assembled on the hearth-rug. Mr Delane-Morton beamed at him.

'Punctuality is the stamp of genius!' he cried, 'I always say so. Some say it's a matter of cobbler's wax—application and so on—but I always say

"punctuality". But let us come in to dinner. My poor sister is unfortunately paralysed,' he added in a minor key, 'so we will take ourselves in, shall we not?' He was so very like an elderly dowager that Armstrong had nearly offered his arm to his host by mistake. 'I will lead, since you do not yet know your way,' and he puffed ahead of Armstrong across the hall to a doorway on the opposite side. 'How cold it strikes when once one leaves the fireside, but then we forget how soon Christmas will be upon us—six days only. We are quite old-fashioned in our love of Christmas. I wish you could be staying on long enough to see our celebrations—carol-singers, you know, and waits, and plum puddings,' he paused here, rather at a loss evidently as to what further seasonable subjects could be added to this list.

They had now reached the dining-room, where the old lady already sat at the end of a long, narrow table. Around on all the walls a perfect patchwork of portraits stared vacantly across at one another in a disjointed assembly of dates and sizes.

'Sit by me, dear Armstrong, if you do not fear the fire,' she said, seizing the conversation as though with a grappling-hook; 'and were you talking about dear Christmas time with all its quaint customs? It always makes me feel as though I ought to wear a ruff and farthingale whenever I think of it.

And I'm sure one would suit you excellently—a ruff, of course, I mean. They

always wore those nice pointed beards in old days, didn't they? and I'm sure that is why I thought of Sir Philip Sidney as soon as you entered the room.'

Arthur was here seen to snigger at the other corner of the table opposite Armstrong.

'Oh, Arthur laughs at my love of old things,' said the old lady, half turning her head in her nephew's direction.

'It wasn't that, Aunt Ellen,' he replied, and then seeing his father's eye wandering in his direction, he reddened and relapsed into silence. 'Sir Philip never wore a beard,' he was heard to mutter.

Mr Delane-Morton had made a counter-attack on his guest.

'Curious,' he said, 'very curious how effeminate many of the fashions of the day appear to us now; for instance, ear-rings, even when—so I am told on quite excellent authority—they only wore one at a time. And yet they were not economical people, I'm sure. The stuff of which their clothes was made must have cost quite a fortune.' He paused to swallow a spoonful of very hot soup, and before Armstrong could reply Aunt Ellen was down on him again like a chicken after a worm.

'Now do tell me, is it really a fact that men wore an ear-ring in one ear only? Does it not seem too strangely barbaric? And do tell me if Mary Queen of Scots really did lose that wonderful rope of black pearls that somebody was said to have found at Hampton Court? It was in all the papers. No? You do not think it true? Ah, well, you see what it is to live all the time in the country and fall a dupe so easily to these newsmongers. And only think what a joy it must be to people like ourselves when someone who really knows the truth about four hundred years ago, as if it were yesterday, comes and puts our stupid notions right!'

'Half the newspapers lie from malice-aforethought,' announced Mr Delane-Morton from the other end of the table, 'and the rest lie because it is in their nature to avoid the truth. If you come to think of it, how seldom you ever come upon a sound common-sense point of view, such as you might find for yourself! But when you do you may fall on your knees, and thank Heaven for

an honest editor. I always say—as a plain man—“Now that is just what I would have said.” Truth doesn’t always lie at the bottom of a well.’

Meanwhile Aunt Ellen had been keeping up a persistent under-current of talk which now burst the bounds of lower tone and crushed her brother into silence.

‘I remember there was a once a man who came here some years ago, during the life of my poor sister-in-law: he called himself the correspondent of some London newspaper whose name I forget. A very curious man he was too; he had knickerbockers and a red beard; and he said he would like to take photographs of the house, and then write an article upon it. He wanted my sister-in-law to give him the information. But I knew more about the place than she did, poor thing! and the idea amused me. I was more of an invalid in those days, and everyone was so kind: they always humoured me at every turn. So I interviewed the man. It was so interesting telling him all one knew, and he listened charmingly without interrupting me once. Not at all what one might have expected from a man in knickerbockers, was it? You must let me tell you my chronicle, as I call it. You see, we old people are really so much more in touch with the past because we are part of it.’ Here a slight wheezing draught from the far end of the table showed that Mr Delane-Morton was sighing for his share of the conversation, but the old lady was adamant. ‘It does not begin further back than the year 1501, when the house was built by a certain John Morton. Then a hundred years or so went by and your friend—another John—added the side wings and the porch to the house.

Cromwell knocked off some of the stone-work, for of course the Mortons were Royalists. There seems to have been little of interest in the years following, but I have a few quaint anecdotes to tell you about some of the pictures. One story is really very funny because it is such a muddle. The muddle is all due to my poor sister-in-law, I believe. Now, you see those two gentlemen in snuff-coloured coats and curled wigs, both in one frame? Well, they were supposed to have killed one another in a quarrel over some lady; but my sister-in-law always would have it that it was those two, one in a buff coat and a powdered queue, and the other in a blue cloth suit and gilt buttons.

Isn’t it queer how people can mix things up so? and the worst of it is that they were both brothers. Not all four at once. No, of course not: how could I think

you would be as stupid as I am, dear Mr Armstrong. No, what I meant to say was—that there were two sets of brothers a hundred years apart. My poor sister-in-law's story was not half so romantic as mine. Her brother, she said, quarrelled simply over money. The elder one had gambled his away, and the younger one refused to lend him any. Now, I really do not think such a thing could be true, do you? No, of course not. At least I was not *sure*, because we old people are not so clever as you young ones. We had not the same chances of education. In my day if a girl could sew, and sing a little, and speak a few words of Italian everyone was quite content. But now . . .' she waved her little withered hand expressively, and the lace ruffles which she wore at her wrists fluttered. She was an exquisite, expensive-looking little thing—the most complete and cared-for object that Armstrong had yet seen in the house. For upon everything else there rested a certain incompleteness, of either too much or too little use: the one showing in worn edges or threadbare patches, the other in a reverence which placed objects under glass cases or handled them over-carefully. The pompous Pym was an emblem of the latter, and a drear youth in livery too evidently adapted from a line of predecessors emphasised the former.

As she made this pause Armstrong found himself without any word to say. The extraordinarily unexpected twists and turns in the conversation, or rather monologue, which had led from a newspaper correspondent to the change in education, all accomplished during the two shortest dinner-courses—soup and fish—paralysed his faculties. The rest of the party seemed to experience the same eclipse. Mr Delane-Morton, who had lapsed into discontented gloom, was addressing disconnected remarks to Godfrey, whilst Arthur and his sister sat side by side in the mutest fashion. Armstrong noticed that no one had spoken to Miss Josephine since they sat down to dinner.

When she was not eating she remained with her eyes cast abstractedly upon her knives and forks, and when she did raise her eyes it was to cast rapid glances at each one of the persons around the table in turn. She had a singularly quick and defiant way of looking at anyone that was almost a challenge.

There seemed to be no help except in the weather, which had already formed the prelude or dinner-march of the evening, when a sudden impulse forced

him to ask the old lady if there were any secret panels or hiding-places in her chronicle of antiquities. Miss Josephine looked up at him in her sharp fashion and made as if to speak.

The old lady shook her head, protesting that he was over-exacting of the house, and that he must be contented with the little feast rather than the plenteous banquet. If the table had not been so preternaturally long that Miss Josephine appeared almost a league's distance away, he would have ventured to ask her for the banished remark. Her very silence, her abruptness presented themselves as virtues in face of urbanity and talkativeness as contrasted by the rest.

Dinner moved ponderously along, and at length reached the moment when wine was placed upon the table, and Miss Josephine rose to retire. A sudden animation of the family accompanied this movement, as though it were the signal for some strategical manoeuvre: at the same instant Pym emerged with pomp from the shadows of a flanking screen, and he, together with Godfrey, bore Aunt Ellen, her chair, and her laces with reverence from the room. Armstrong watched the small procession cross the hall, followed by Arthur carrying a footstool, and Mr Delane-Morton with the ostensible purpose of opening the door, which he did after having kept the procession waiting some seconds. Then the two women vanished into the shadows, the men returning to their wine and cigarettes. But not for long.

'We usually sit in the library after dinner, and smoke there to keep my sister company,' explained Mr Delane-Morton with an air of unconscious ruefulness, and presently with the same ruefulness the entire party followed in the direction the women had taken.

The 'library' was gloomy, oak-panelled, low-ceiled. It was almost innocent of books, one large case alone sustaining its title to the name. The two little women sat in the midst of the gloom on either side the fireplace with empty hands, and silence only as an occupation. Miss Josephine had a newspaper across her knees at which she frowned from time to time, as though it were an enemy she wished to attack but did not dare. Mr Delane-Morton drew up chairs for himself and Armstrong before the hearth, Godfrey completed the circle, and Arthur hung on the outskirts. There was chat between the two elders and their guest. Armstrong acknowledged a kind of perverted charm

about the old lady such as spoilt beings, brute or human, generally manage to acquire—a certain habit of expectation that fulfilled its ends. The time passed almost pleasantly.

‘I’m sure those panels near the fireplace were meant for use,’ said Armstrong at last.

‘Try and see,’ said the brother and sister, smiling at their own suggestion.

‘Let us see who can find the hidden place first,’ Armstrong returned.

‘Quite a delightful game. How amusing you are!’ cried the little old lady, chuckling gleefully. The whole party arose and began a careful tapping and scratching of the oak. Only Miss Josephine soon returned to her seat.

‘Shirking, Ape’s-face!’ said Arthur. She shrugged.

No hollow sounds responding to their efforts the party presently resumed their former positions and desultory conversation. The firelight and an ill-trimmed lamp illumined the scene only scantily. It was during a pause, which this dimness seemed to appropriate, that the wood panelling gave one of those curious sudden cracks so familiar to the wakeful sleeper in old houses.

There is something almost intentionally malign in the sound, like a jesting boggart. The two women jumped.

Conversation continued but heralded the final move to bed, when the panelling again uttered its protest.

‘We seem to have disturbed it,’ said Armstrong, and the dim silence again descended on the company.

‘A protest to your touch, dear Mr. Armstrong.’

Again the noise traversed silence, this time with a continued heaving sound as of something trying to get free. It came rather oddly, and somehow held the group in a strained attention. The crack expanded to a creak, the creak to a noise like the rending of woodwork, and then with a crash a portion of the panelling fell out on to the floor at Ape’s-face’s elbow, barely missing her in

its fall. Behind it left a dark and yawning space about the size of an ordinary paving-stone. The family sat and gaped upon it with a sort of awe.

‘How very queer, dear Mr Armstrong,’ said the old lady. ‘John, do pick it up, and let Arthur ring for Pym to sweep up all those untidy chips. I’m sure that’s a cobweb. Godfrey, do find me a duster!’

This recall to the uses of civilisation roused Mr Delane-Morton from his seat, and induced him to gather up the fallen panel. He then proceeded cautiously to the aperture in the wall and peered within.

‘Dear me,’ he said, ‘I think I see a few old books.’

Armstrong struck a match and held it against the darkness. The flame flickered and the coldness of stone struck against his hand. Mr Delane-Morton reached for the match-box and imitated his guest.

‘Perhaps you would not mind lifting them on to the table for me,’ he said. Armstrong complied. There were only three gaping volumes of thick parchment, two bound in brown calf-skin, the other one unbound. But for them the cupboard was empty. They were laid upon the table and the family crowded round. There was a brief silence whilst Mr Morton turned the leaves. He could not read the writing within.

‘Ah!’ sighed the little old lady from her distant chair, ‘dear Mr Armstrong, will *you* not tell me what they have found?’ The implied reproof, reproach, or whatever it might be, caused a flutter in the circle, bringing Mr Delane-Morton, books and all, to her knee. She too turned the leaves, frustrated.

‘We turn to you,’ she said, looking up at Armstrong.

Having held back a little, he now came forward to examine. The unbound book was merely an account-book, but the others contained the manuscript of John Morton’s work on the Soul.

‘How strange!’ said Mr. Delane-Morton, breathing heavily with bulging eyes, ‘and so opportune for your research, my dear fellow,’ with which the books were replaced upon the table. Pym appeared like a punctual apparition at the

door, and the procession which had swept from the dining-room swept upstairs. It all happened with so much precision that Armstrong could have imagined the falling of the panel to be pre-ordained as well. He was alone with the books.

‘Perhaps you would like to look at them a little,’ said his host returning.

Armstrong confessed he should, and again he was alone.

III

A Story of the House: Isabella of the Downs

THE FLAME OF THE TWO CANDLES and the flame of the fire fenced with shadow-points across the yellowed pages spread before Armstrong on the table. The cupboard which the panel had covered yawned dark beside the fireplace like a toothless mouth: it lay to his right hand, and he was strangely aware of its outline even though he did not turn his head that way: it was the kind of object that must always be seen from one corner of the eye, watched furtively and almost against the will.

The book with rusted edges and worn leaves roused in him the keenest sense of excitement: the words which had been so familiar in print took on a different character now that one read them in the actual handwriting of the author. He felt he was approaching the essence of the man's character as never before. The pen-strokes, the curls, and irregularities of line seemed like the very accentuations of speech or thought. The man's voice shaped itself in his imagination, spoke in his ear. He read on to the final page, and then stopped with a sudden shock, aware that the last few pages differed utterly from those in the printed book. The latter had ended on a long quotation from Sir Kenelm Digby's treatise on the soul; this continued after the quotation written by the same hand but evidently at some different period of time. The very language differed a little—less polished, more rambling, and finally ending in the midst of an unfinished sentence with an untidy series of ink-marks, as though the pen had been allowed to slide and roll across the paper.

The last paragraph ran thus:

And as I think one final proof of the spirit's existence may add weight to the matter which we are now in the act of discussing, so I would put forth as an assured and true statement this most positive proof, that whereas it is conceivable that mind in the body without spirit should speak to another in like case, how is it possible that mind in the body should speak to mind that is

without body, corporeally existing, without aid of the spirit ? And yet so it is, and hath been known of some that it is so. I myself have heard a certain man aver . . . ’

and there it ceased, with the pen-marks scattered across the remainder of an empty page. He looked at it absently, wondering what the end of the sentence might have been, and rumpling the corners of the account-book with heedless fingers. It was at this moment that he became aware how cold the room had grown, and: that the fire had sunk very low on the hearth: only half a log remained, glowing almost transparent, the fire had so eaten to its very heart. He was half pondering on the possibility of adding one more log or retiring to bed, when he noticed that the door was standing wide open behind him.

‘Well, that settles it,’ he said, standing up and yawning, and yet without knowing why he stopped in the middle of his yawn with arms half-extended on the stretch. It was quite likely that Mr Delane-Morton had come to rouse him from his studies, and then seeing his complete absorption, had withdrawn repenting, but leaving the door open as a mute suggestion. Armstrong completed both yawn and stretch. And still he felt disinclined to move, almost as much as he now felt disinclined to touch the books. He discovered this absurd reluctance when it came to the point of replacing them on their shelves for the night. He shook himself and with some sort of conscious effort moved them in one armful into the recess. They seemed to make a tremendous rustle and bumping sound as he deposited them rather hastily upon their shelves. When he turned round again he was aware of someone standing in the shadow of the doorway. He could not repress a start. Then he saw that it was Miss Josephine Delane-Morton. She stood and stared at him with her mournful eyes, until he began to wonder whether she was insane, or sleep-walking. A moment passed without either uttering a word, then looking straight before her she came towards the fire, stirred up the ashes and added a log.

‘How cold it is!’ she said, both voice and body shivering at the words.

Armstrong made no reply. She had not even glanced at him after her first long stare from the doorway, and he was not considering it an appropriate moment for small-talk, or talk of any kind, for that matter. And indeed it scarcely seemed as if she were conscious of his presence. The glow of the fire

lit up her dark face, making of it something vivid and strange, and alien to any human countenance he had ever seen before: the lines, the different planes of light and shade gave it a curious attraction in this aspect of fire-shine. It was strangely animal, strangely human—a pathetic antagonism, an outraged parallel. He could not help watching her as the little southern monkey, chilled by northern frosts, and huddled over the poor substitute for eternal sunshines which our winter affords. And yet he wished ardently to be out of her presence. He made towards the door.

Ape's-face turned her eyes quietly upon him.

‘You were looking at the old papers,’ she said, more as a remark than a query.

‘Yes,’ Armstrong replied, ‘your ancestor’s manuscript interested me greatly.

He has kept me up rather late, hasn’t he?’

‘I should like to see them,’ she continued.

‘No doubt your father will show them to you tomorrow.’

‘I do not think so,’ she said; ‘please would you put them on the table?’

‘I shall have to leave you to them, then. I have read myself almost to sleep with them already.’

‘Please put them on the table.’ Rather rebelliously he complied. The old account book fell open on the top of the pile of manuscript.

‘What is that?’ she asked, coming up to the table and lifting the little volume as if it were a live thing. Her hands trembled along the edges of the page like flames.

Armstrong shrugged his shoulders. ‘Nothing of interest,’ he said, ‘the old gentleman’s accounts.’

She turned to the last page, peering at the writing which to her was evidently undecipherable. ‘I cannot read it at all,’ she said.

‘No, I daresay not. Accounts are dry things at the best of times.’

She peered more eagerly at the page. ‘Is that word “December”?’ she asked; ‘and here is the date—1510. December 21, Anno Domini 1510.

Nearly this time of the year—how many hundreds of years ago?—four hundred, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ he said impatiently. ‘In daylight I am sure you would find yourself able to read quite a lot of it. This seems to be the farm-bailiff’s account.’

‘There was no farm-bailiff,’ she said after a pause, in which the extraordinary silence of the house seemed almost to rise up in a concrete form, and wait beyond the threshold just out of sight. ‘You see, at that time he was keeping the accounts himself; there was a change of bailiffs, and this happened between the departure of one and the coming of the next. You see that here there are three different kinds of writing.’

‘And this entry belongs to the hand of my old friend of the treatise.’

‘Of course,’ she said. Armstrong disliked her tone of assurance.

‘I suppose you know his handwriting well enough.’

‘No. I have never seen it before. But I know he wanted to get rid of the bailiff, or he could never have done what he wished. That is why he puts his own entry here. What does it say?’

‘“To John the shepherd sixpence.”’

And then,’ she said, ‘there come no more entries of John the shepherd?’

‘The entries themselves end here.’

‘At least I am glad he felt he could not touch the book afterwards.’

‘After what?’

‘After the man was dead.’

‘He died, then ?’

‘Yes, you may call it so if you please, and perhaps at this hour the real word is better left unsaid.’

‘You know a good deal about your ancestor and his people?’

‘I know about this,’ turning the leaves of the pages again. ‘Do you know a good deal about him?’

‘I fancied I knew all there was to be known until I saw your father’s letter in the *Spectator*.’

‘And now that you have read his account-book and his work on the soul in manuscript you will know more than ever?’

‘I felt more in touch with his mind tonight, reading the words as he had penned them, than ever in my life before.’

‘And what kind of mind do you now feel that he had?’

‘The mind of a gentleman of his time—as eager for a new thought as a child for a new toy, and charmed with conceits and devices in words as only the youngest can be. He is as pleased with the little learning that he has garnered on his way through life as if he had hit on some profound truth. It is the very ingenuousness of the man that is his attraction. His erudition sits upon him like a cap and bells. He seems to argue for the sheer joy of the game.

I think he would as soon have taken one side as another. But then he is credulous and listens to his neighbours’ tales with a courteous seriousness—again like a child.’

‘You forget that he was one of the most cunning fencers of his time. He was no child in that. The very way in which he would put his own adventures to another man’s account is not so very ingenuous either.’

‘His own?’

‘Oh yes,’ she said, ‘the very things that he had done. But he was afraid at the

last moment, and the proof that would have put his book beyond all refutation was the only one he could not give.'

'I should like to hear about that,' said Armstrong, sitting down opposite to her, and himself forgetting that the time was late. She looked at him for a moment with a curious smile.

'There is a story in the country,' she said, 'which you do not hear very often now—for there aren't many old people left to tell it and the young ones don't want to hear. They say they despise superstitions but really they are afraid. I suppose you know that besides your old friend himself, there still lived, at the time those accounts were written, a younger brother and one sister. It sounds like the beginning of a fairy-tale, doesn't it? The Mortons have always been poor, they were poor even then; when the other landlords who turned their plough-lands into pasture had fine flocks of sheep, we still could not make ours thrive; and when other men profited from their share of despoiled churches we seemed to get a poor lot for our portion. The brothers were proud and kept themselves apart, because they could not afford to be lavish in their entertaining like the rest of their world. You could tell he was a man of leisure with much time on his hands by the elaboration of his work—a busier man would not have stayed to trifle with his business in that way.'

'That might be,' Armstrong agreed, musing.

'He saved what he could so as to make a good show when he went to town, but at home he was mean and everything about him was starved. I don't know if the accounts show how he pared his expenses down to the last farthing; but I'm sure he did so. The younger brother looked after the place when he was away, and the sister was always there to keep house—her name was Isabella. I am as certain as I can be of anything that her life was starved as well as her purse. She was busy keeping the house in order from morning until night; and a woman who has to do that, with little or nothing to do it upon, has not much joy in this world and hasn't time to think of any other.

All the same, if she is still young there will be times when she will think of young things—especially on the days when the sun is shining all over the downs, and you can count hundreds of tiny flowers among the grass where the sheep are feeding. There's a sheltered place at the top of the downs where

they say an old camp was once made: and you can get down behind the old trenches, lying in the sun and the grass out of the winds. The elder brother owned a finer flock of sheep at the time that book was written than he had had for years. The shepherd had sixpence a week for minding the flock, as you saw the last time it was written down in that book.'

Armstrong crossed his knees and folded his arms in an attitude of attention.

'It is getting late,' she conceded; 'shall I stop?'

'Oh, if you aren't tired . . .' he almost pleaded, not in the least caring now whether she were tired or not. She smiled again with the funny smile which reminded him of the portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici in the Uffizi Gallery.

The smile wandered into his mind and quickly out again, as she had recommenced her tale.

'The elder brother was in town, and the younger brother in control of the place when the girl went up on to the downs. I should think it was just one of those fresh mornings I told you about, when the hawthorn trees are white in the hollows. You can generally hear the larks singing up there too, and it all feels very joyous and young. But it isn't unlike drinking water fresh from the spring: there's a keen sharp taste to it all the time. She was tired of mending, and cooking, and scolding unthrifty maids—tired of spying out petty thefts and sifting half-truths or deliberate falsehoods. I don't think she can have been more than eighteen, which is quite young after all. And when she got to the top of the down in the sunlight she found the shepherd lying between the folds of the green trenches watching the flocks of sheep. The shepherd was young too and as handsome as she could wish. She had never seen him before either, so that he was as fresh to her eye as the young morning.

I think that she was rather beautiful too: for it was before there began to be ugly people in our family. She had a beautiful soft mouth, and her face must have been made of lovely curves before she grew thin and white.

'You can guess what happened after that. She was always on the downs of a morning, with the shepherd sometimes piping to pass the time away, but mostly I should think they sat in the sheltered hollow out of touch of the

winds with the sheep cropping the grass a little way away. He had red hair which shone in the sun, and he was vivid as all the life which until then she had been missing. I don't suppose they had a thought beyond the moment.

All went very quietly until the elder brother returned from town; but after that it was not easy for their meeting. There was more to do in the house, and the brother himself was often on the downs looking at the sheep, thinking of the money he would make out of them—what with the wool, the fells, and the meat. She bore with not seeing the shepherd for a time, but in the end she could not keep away: and sometimes she would steal out in the summer evenings to find him in the hollow of the downs. She was very happy, poor thing, and used to sing about the house. The younger brother would never have noticed anything, but your friend had a nice discerning wit, as I daresay you found out long ago. Anyhow it was not a very hard riddle. But the thing which no doubt puzzled him was who the man could be? A young man of breeding so seldom came to the house, or any of the yeomen, or better-to-do farmers either. At first he did not think that a sister of his would look beneath her, but then he considered that youth was youth, and he began to look beneath too, after her. He watched, but could find nothing. Then late in the summer he went away; before he went he gave a hint of his knowledge to his brother, and told him to keep his eyes open. When he came home at the end of November the younger brother had found nothing at all; he had only noticed that his sister was not so gay as before, but often sat looking rather sadly into the fire with her hands folded idly in her lap. Bitter weather was setting in, and they had set up the sheep-folds under the edge of the down between the trenches of the old camp. All the tiny flowers in the grasses were dead now; and the ground was hard with the frost when the snow didn't cover it. The shepherd used to sleep up there in a little wattled hut, where he could hear the heavy breathing of the sheep all the night through: the place used to look warm and cheerful when the fire was lighted, I expect.

'The elder brother used to watch his sister covertly all day, but he saw nothing strange in her behaviour. She seldom went out of doors in this wintry weather. It was wearing towards Christmas; the snow had fallen pretty deep that time; the sheep used to huddle close together in the folds for warmth, and then they were nearly frozen. When the snow did melt the sky wore that heavy hodden-grey that promised more to follow. One morning early, before

dawn, the elder brother got up just to see how the sheep were faring; and he came to the side-door which used to be just where that window stands now.' She pointed with her hand to a mullioned window over against the hearth. 'From outside you can see where the stone-work has been fitted into the doorway. He found the door, which the night before he had left unbolted, unlatched. Outside a light covering of fine frost lay all along the surface of the grass and the path which led on to the downs. There were slight footprints leading right up to the door, and on the threshold a little lump of frost, as if it had been shaken there from someone's shoes. The footsteps were small. He went back into the house, and knocked upon his sister's door. There was no answer, so he opened it and looked within. He could see her head upon the pillow, and her long hair streaming over it.

'Next night was starlight, and just as frosty. At three in the morning he was up and out at the side-door there. He found prints in the frost and followed them up to the downs, and as far as the wattled hut. The door of the hut was tightly fastened. He went home again, and knocked on his sister's door: there was no answer. He went in and it was empty. He had been careful to leave his footprints alongside the others.

'There were four days to Christmas. It was the day for paying his men.

The shepherd came, and he gave the young man his pay. It was bitterer outside than ever, and the snow seemed ready to fall at a moment's notice: the world was waiting for it. 'There's a market tomorrow at Salisbury,' he said to the shepherd; 'take ten of the ewes and go.' The shepherd looked at him, wondering. 'It will be snowing before the hour is out, master,' he said, 'and it's sixteen miles in the teeth of the wind. A man might win through, but not the ewes.' 'Go, nevertheless,' said the master. 'I fear I shall lose them,' said the shepherd. 'I missed one of them last night,' said the master, looking the shepherd well between the eyes. The young man reddened to the roots of his hair, and then he went pale. He turned on his heel, and went out. In a half-hour he was out with the sheep across the downs to Salisbury; but within an hour the snow began to fall, and you couldn't tell what way you were going.

The sheep-dog couldn't get the sheep along, and they began to grow stupid with the snow. They had lost their way along the track before nightfall.

‘That day and the next went by. It snowed without stopping until mid-way through the second day. At nightfall the shepherd hadn’t come home.

The day before Christmas Eve the brothers went out to look for him, and they found him dead with the sheep in a drift ten miles away. They brought him home and buried him.

‘After that the sister grew more and more sad and silent than before; she scarcely spoke, or even looked at her brothers. She would sit all through a meal quite mute and sometimes without eating, so that they could hardly bear at last to be with her. It angered them so much to see her grief. At length they got a bailiff to look after the place, and both of them went away, leaving her alone. They were away close upon a year, and when they came home again at the end of the autumn they saw a great change in her. She had grown very thin and pale, but she often smiled, seemed almost cheerful, and would talk quite freely with them. But if they tried to kiss her, or even touch her hand, she shivered and turned cold. They hated that most of all, worse than her silence. The elder brother almost loathed her: he would watch her from the corner of the hearth, and spy at her every movement.

‘It was a week before Christmas that he noticed she seemed more cheerful than usual, and as he could see no visible cause he watched her more carefully than ever. Then at last it struck him to watch her by night as well as by day.

He would pretend to go to bed, but in reality sit up listening to hear if she left her room; till one night he heard her steal out gently and go to the side-door there. He followed her at a safe distance right up on to the downs, where the winter before the sheep had been penned, but now there was nothing between the trenches. She walked up and down, seeming to talk to herself, making strange gestures: then again after some time she would go away again home.

The second night he took the younger brother with him. They crept nearer, and they could hear her seeming to talk to some other person, but they could see no one. The third night they went, and this time they fancied they saw the form of a shadowy man. They shuddered and went away afraid. The fourth night was the same. The fifth night they determined she should see the shepherd neither living nor dead; and they waited outside her door in the

passage upstairs. She came out of her room noiselessly and ran past them, unseeing. They sprang upon her and caught her as she ran. But she escaped and got down to the door; again they nearly caught her as she passed. But she ran shrieking up the downs with them after her. As the elder brother came up with her he distinctly saw the figure of the shepherd standing in the shadow of the trenches. She called to him bitterly as the brother caught her by the arm. The brother made as if to strike the figure with his dagger; crying she flung herself between and he struck her instead. I think that he struck at her again, for she cries out several times. He must have meant to kill her. I believe he thought her a shame to them all, and he was a very proud man.'

She stopped speaking. Armstrong noticed at once the intense cold of the house, and the curious earthen smell that seemed to pervade the entire place.

It spread more and more through the room, until he could almost see it as a palpable substance.

'What a tragedy,' he said at last. 'Do you know, you have almost made me feel afraid to go to bed!' and he laughed a little, but certainly his hands felt very cold and rather uncertain.

'I don't think you would ever see anything,' she said, replacing the books, and afterwards handing him a candle. They went silently upstairs together, leaving the house below in darkness; the earthen smell and cold ascended with them.

IV

Green Growth

CURIOSLY ENOUGH ARMSTRONG was glad when morning came. As a rule he was untroubled by sleeplessness, being a healthy individual and leading a healthy existence. He could not even plead the extenuating circumstances of a banging door, or windows creaking in the wind. There had been no wind, the house had been utterly quiet; yet all the night through he had been convinced of something passing up and down noiselessly in the passage outside. Once he opened the door to look and listen. There was nothing but an intensifying of the feeling, and yet no tangible conviction. The piercing cold sent him hurrying back to bed.

He counted jumping sheep, he imagined clouds and watched them melt into one another, he repeated a single poem over to himself several times: nothing would do. He grew angry and argued with himself, but something watchful in his brain refused all intercourse with slumber. His fire was burning pleasantly still, and he watched the pleasant shadows bow and bend across the ceiling in agreeable, sidling movements. The room was warm and comfortable; he could enjoy that at least. He luxuriated in it, he plunged himself deep in comfort, and a gentle drowsiness invaded his senses. He watched sleep approaching warily, out of one eye as it were. Then suddenly he found that the door was standing wide open. It had announced its intention in no way whatever, not a creak, not the suspicion of a sound.

Simply it disclosed a gloom of impenetrable depths. It seemed almost as though the house were full of something larger than it could contain. He half expected the walls to expand and fall outwards, yet again there was no sound, no visible or audible sign of pressure, nothing but a piercing cold and a certain suspicion of that earthen smell. There was something so strange about the odour that he could match it with nothing in his remembrance, try as he might. It was like several things and then again like none. It was not actually unpleasant, and yet it certainly was not desirable: certainly it was not unclean.

He got up and shut the door. He was tired and yet wide awake; this angered him, but so it continued until the grey of morning, when a heavy sleep came over him, and made him late for breakfast. He went down feeling that he disliked the house and should send himself a telegram to summon him away on urgent business the day after next.

All the family, including Aunt Ellen, were assembled at breakfast, although several of them had finished—namely, the three younger members. Mr Delane-Morton, however, was still actively employed, and expressed his pleasure at having a companion. Miss Ellen pecked at some hot scones which seemed to be under her especial patronage. She had that protective air indeed over everything at her end of the table, which takes away one's appetite.

At length, when even she had finished, Armstrong begged that no one might be kept waiting on his account. The idea was repudiated with horror.

‘We always wait for our guests!’ cried Mr Delane-Morton.

In consequence of which Armstrong hurried, choked, and chafed.

After breakfast he sat down and enclosed a copy of the telegram which was to be sent to him the day after next, to his man in London. With the integrity of an angry conscience he deposited the letter guilelessly within the letter-box on the hall table. After which act he felt resigned in a greater degree.

Everybody seemed to live in the library. Aunt Ellen had her large chair placed somewhere conveniently between the window and the fireplace, whence she chatted amiably with Armstrong and Godfrey. Mr Delane-Morton's favourite barometer figured on a table near by, which he contemplated profoundly until Pym summoned him away on some affair of state. Arthur sat disconsolately in a corner, turning the pages of a book with one hand, and rumpling his hair with the other. Ape's-face was the only one absent: now and again Miss Ellen would cast captious glances round the room, as if she resented anyone's absence from attendance upon her.

‘I am never quite at my best in the mornings,’ she said, smiling pathetically, ‘so you must let me show you the house this afternoon, Mr Armstrong. Perhaps you would take our guest down into the village, Godfrey,

and show him our interesting church.' Godfrey smiled his willingness and went off to put on his boots. 'Such a dear fellow,' she said affectionately. 'Arthur, it would do you good to go also.' Arthur collected his limbs together and arose.

'A good bit younger than the others, and rather a spoiled child still, perhaps,' was the label fixed on his departure.

'We are all like that at his age,' rejoined Armstrong, somewhat annoyed at the discredit of the boy which her tone implied.

'Godfrey was always charming; so graceful too.'

Here Mr Delane-Morton reappeared. There was something ruffled in his manner, and a disturbance of all the fleshy curves on his face. Armstrong noticed how the old lady noticed this also.

'Godfrey and Arthur are taking Mr Armstrong to see the church,' she said.

'Ah, ah!' said he absently, 'I think I will come too. You will be alone, Ellen?'

'Yes,' she replied suavely, 'but please do not think of my loneliness.'

'No, no, of course not,' he answered hurriedly; 'no, decidedly I think I had better go with them,' and he rambled out of the room, ostensibly to get his hat, on which quest Armstrong followed him. The four men assembled in the hall, but Mr Morton still had no hat. He came out on to the doorstep with them; looking with an unseeing eye upon the clouds, and then shot back again into the house, saying:

'I think I had better sit with your Aunt Ellen,' during which time he gazed abstractedly at Armstrong. So the three set out together without him.

The day was mild for December, but a dampness hung about the atmosphere and added a flat tone to the landscape that was at once depressing and distasteful. The great down behind the house looked dense and sullen, all curves and edges were blurred; the elm trees which stood on either side the drive, leafless though they were, seemed borne down with their own weight.

It looked as if, like Samson, they would readily have involved others in their own ruin—revengeful giants.

The place was much as Armstrong had expected, entirely flat except for the ridges of the downs; but to say flat is not to suppose it featureless. The lines of trees disposed along the hedgerows, a strange dispersal of thatched cottages amongst the fields, the sudden intervention of a stream—all these combined in a curious suggestiveness which tickled the imagination.

The village was not very far from the lodge-gates: grey-walled, grey-tiled, with now and then a thatch, now and then a staring contrivance of red bricks and blue slate, the houses clustered round the church. There were strangely narrow lanes between high walls winding in and out without visible ending, over which would peer a clipped yew or a denuded pear-branch. The church stood enclosed between a double quadrangle of grey stone houses of a monastic appearance, and pollarded limes on which the moss grew green: upon the stone it had grown yellow. A battered cross stood near the porch, an empty niche with elaborately carved canopy overhung the entrance. The church belonged to St Michael still. An enormous shadow of wings seemed to make twilight in the place. That feeling of extreme antiquity, which is a contradiction to old age, hung heavily about the chancel. A fretted screen of dark carving stood like a deep-meshed veil across the aisles, shrouding two chapels and forming the rood-loft: above it stood the cross. In one of these chapels was a dimness like the shadow of eternity.

Godfrey had been murmuring information the while with the suavity of a guide-book; but Armstrong could not listen. Godfrey said there was a fine brass in the chapel and urged him to enter. Armstrong felt a reluctance to cross the threshold. Someone, a woman, was saying her prayers within.

‘It’s only my sister,’ he said in a lowered tone. But Armstrong shook his head. He had always the feeling that it was unfair to watch people at their prayers—that is, when they were really praying: it seemed like looking through a keyhole. Still there was something in the girl’s attitude that riveted his glance. Her body had sunk almost to the floor, and her head sunk low between her shoulders so that only the nape of the neck was visible: her hands showed white and strained, raised high above her body, the elbows

fixed rigidly upon the desk at which she knelt. There was something extraordinary about the limpness of her attitude contrasted with the intensity of those clasped hands. All the time that they remained in the church he could think of nothing else, although, archaeologically speaking, there were far more interesting things to be observed. The shadow of strange things only left them as they passed out again.

Godfrey's conversation was so polite that Armstrong could scarcely support it; he tried to probe beneath, but there seemed no depth to probe; he was like some fourth dimension with all the other three omitted. Arthur suggested returning by a longer route which lay across the meadows, Godfrey was all for the smoother road through the village. Godfrey's method of dispute was simply to smile, say nothing, and continue his way: it wrought Arthur to desperation. From where they argued the entire ridge of the downs showed itself against the heavy grey sky. One solitary figure, could be seen to move along it; so far away was it that one could scarcely tell whether it were man or beast. Presently it descended a little along the grass slope, and the flash of a scarlet garment proclaimed it a woman. Armstrong, abstracted from the dispute, watched the object; he found that Godfrey was covertly watching it also. Arthur was immersed in the pursuit of his argument.

'Suppose,' said Godfrey, smiling gently, 'that you take Mr Armstrong home your way, and I will take my own.'

Armstrong affirmed his willingness for the meadow-path, and the two went off together. He was thankful to be quit of Godfrey, and it appeared that Arthur experienced the same relief.

'The fellow never went to school,' said he wisely, 'and that is all the trouble. Aunt Ellen brought him up with a tutor: she said he was too delicate for school.'

'He looks thriving enough now.'

'Oh, he's all right,' said Arthur with conviction; and the strides which Godfrey was taking in the direction of home seemed to say so much.

If grumbling is conversation there was no lack of converse on Arthur's part

as they went across the meadows. It did not appear in the least strange to Armstrong that he should do so; younger men were perpetually using him as a father confessor, and he had humour or sympathy enough to enjoy the office. It was not often that he forgot himself so far as to offer advice in return.

That, except in very rare cases, is the last thing that youth requires from its elders. Armstrong had an excellent memory, and he was not forgetful of his own youth.

Arthur's complaint was his father's desire that he should take Orders; but the difficulty of the situation lay in the fact that he had no alternative career to offer, and that not only did his father wish to see him a clergyman, but also Aunt Ellen had expressed her will upon the subject. It struck Armstrong as curious that the little old lady should have usurped such an ascendancy over the Delane-Morton family.

'Miss Delane-Morton is not easy to persuade then?' he said.

'Aunt Ellen, do you mean?' he asked; 'she's only Delane, you know. That is where she comes from—try as she may to forget it.' He pointed with his hand across the fields.

They had come now to a long valley which lay between two slight folds of ground; it lay very low and a stream cut through it to go winding down beneath heavy swathings of green weeds and slime into the distance. The eye lost itself in an expanse of verdure that was restful, not to say enervating, in its reposeful monotony of tone. In summer it would be green beyond endurance, when the heavy elm trees, which rose on either side of the stream, would unfurl clouds of foliage against the wide expanse of sky and blot it out.

A long high building stood over the stream where it bent and took a plunge, forming a small cataract. The face of the building was lined with shuttered windows, though in some cases the shutters had fallen away, leaving bare casements innocent of glass. The place was forbidding though vacant in expression. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere along the whole expanse of the valley or in any of the fields near by; a decayed cottage, covered with a battered thatch, stood as an emblem of desertion. The silence of desolation

covered it.

‘Those were the Delane silk-mills,’ continued Arthur with evident contempt. ‘They were French refugees, you know, who settled here, and made quite a thriving business of the concern. There were quite a number of French people around here at one time, and you’ll find buried French names amongst some of the cottagers still. My father sold the business. It hadn’t been paying so well since the time when large factories started. Do you see that mound with a small tree growing on it ? That is where their house stood.

My father pulled it down after he married mother, and Aunt Ellen came to live with us. She always hated the mills. It wouldn’t let because no one wanted to live near those empty barracks, and people said it wasn’t healthy.

Our house and theirs used to look across at one another once upon a time.’

Armstrong noticed that Arthur considered himself more Morton than Delane: an inherited trait. It amused him.

They both turned from the mills to gaze across the meadows to the higher ground on which the old house stood. At this time of the year it was distinctly visible through the trees, spreading itself firmly along the slopes of the down. The green growth of the valley surged to its feet, but receded from the chalk ramparts that defended the approach. To any one looking up from the windows of the destroyed house in the valley to its fellow opposite, Armstrong could imagine the sensation that an envious and only half comprehending mind would evoke at the sight. Generations of Delanes envying generations of Mortons for something they had not and could never acquire, and which they would not know how to use if they came into possession. Traditions being heritable and not purchasable the Delanes had probably failed to grasp the fact. They had put some one else’s hat on their own head, and did not realise their misfit. You may pay as much as you please for a hat but it does not follow that it will fit you. He could not be sure if the Morton hat was too big for the Delane, or the Delane too big for the Morton.

The Delane was so effectually disguised or travestied that it was almost impossible to say. The ruined mill set his imagination to work. It was not a

comely thing for adornment, it was not—strictly speaking—a habitation. Its excuse for existence had been the cause of its erection—work. Now that the work had gone it had neither excuse nor existence. It was simply a corpse, and the grass throve and grew green upon it. But grass has its distinct uses as long as it is kept in bounds. Here the grass seemed to surge up from the valley against the chalk, looking like an invading force.

‘Your aunt is a very interesting woman,’ said Armstrong in the light of the ruined house and desolate mill. Arthur whistled.

‘Then she’s the only interesting one I know,’ he replied.

‘Perhaps she isn’t your idea of an interesting woman?’

‘I don’t want a woman to be *interesting*.’

‘I meant that she had character, and that is interesting.’

‘Well, Josephine has character, but she’s remarkably plain, even for a sister, isn’t she?’

‘You don’t think good looks and character go together?’

‘Well, there’s old Godfrey,’ returned Arthur, thrusting out his chin, ‘he would have made a beautiful woman: a little too dark perhaps for real beauty.’

I think you want a dash of fire for that. I once saw a girl . . .’ he stopped hastily, then went on again, ‘I tried to draw her. I draw, you know,’ he announced gravely, as if he wished to spare Armstrong a painful or startling shock.

‘Perhaps you’ll show me your drawings then,’ said Armstrong rather absently. He was still thinking of Aunt Ellen looking out from those vanished windows upon the Morton house, coveting with her whole soul. He wondered how she enjoyed the possession now that it was so completely in her hands. The family had become quite a pleasant little problem. One of the prominent points in it became the personality of the late Mrs Delane-Morton.

How had the combined attack of the Delanes mastered her ? The scenes of

the play which were enacted long before he or even Arthur appeared upon the stage were what concerned him now. He was anxious to get back as quickly as possible from the valley to the hill, and see if there were any answer to his question contained within the old mansion.

V

The Story of the Church: A Sermon which need not be read

WHILE ARMSTRONG WAS WALKING across the fields with Arthur the girl still remained upon her knees in the dim shadowed chapel, under the stained light through the glass of the windows, falling in jewelled patches and an unassorted entanglement that caught her dark figure and her very white hands in their network. It seemed as if she were held there and bound with something stronger than cords, though utterly unseen. She never moved while the sunlight slowly passed from pane to pane of the leaded spaces; her hands remained as rigidly upraised, her body as abased. The quiet of the place hung in thick folds about her, almost as though the prayer of all the ages had combined to weave something finely palpable between those chapel walls. The imagination might have caught the faint flash and stir of the withdrawing shuttle knitting together a mystical web, the quick answering throb which welcomed its return. The light shifted across the dark paving-stones, from the altar steps it drew nearer the carved screen dividing the chapel from the aisle. It passed over the brass figure of a knight in armour, then to a little broken plate that lay beyond—half of its inscription torn away, and the faint outline alone left to show that the effigy of a priest had once shone upon the pavement. ‘Of your charity,’ said the ancient letters, ‘pray . . .’ then came the jagged edges battered into silence.

The mute appeal of the thing, the suggestion of a cry suddenly broken in its utterance caught at some sort of response in the kneeling girl. ‘Of your charity . . .’ said the little brass again. The marks of the nails could clearly be seen, the nails which had fastened the scroll below the feet of the nameless priest. The sun shifted still a little. The shape of the tonsured head came into view; the erasure of all detail, ornament, whatever had been, spoke of selflessness however much enforced. ‘Of your charity pray . . .’ the broken phrase repeated itself. Then no more; no suggestion of the prayer to be used, no name of anyone for whom to pray.

‘And some there be which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born.’

The words seemed to come out of silence, from nowhere, and yet the chapel was full of them. Again the sentence said ‘Of your charity pray . . .’ and then fell upon a whispered silence, ‘Not for my soul; nor have they left me a name that you could mention in your praying. It is well; is not my soul a little thing amongst so many that may need it just as much? And yet I think no soul could need it more. But yet I am content it should pass forgotten from amongst those that come after me. As the counting of years go, it must be long ages since human voices said one prayer in my remembrance. It is very well. There are better prayers that may be said. And yet it is good that men should pray for one another in all love. A little word and soon said, daughter: but I heard your heart speaking, and it crossed these many hundred years of silence. It said such things as I would be saying, and therefore it sounded in my ears; for so it is we come together, may be, you on your side of life, and I on mine. Nevertheless I hear you, and yours is a wise heart that speaks, as well as a kind. Of your charity . . . so poor and humble a word; so common and to be despised, some might think, unless it go well clothed in a fair shape. Very like you have a fair shape also, but I hear only your fair voice; but if you have not a fair shape it is sure that few will look for kindness in you and ask it of you. Yet you will give it. You have given already; I have heard and I know.

You are willing to cross from your side of life to mine if only you may put your prayer into deeds. It was not so with me. I was blind at the beginning and afraid at the end. Hence is it not well my name should perish, and I become as though I had never been?

‘Walking the field path in my time I still felt my soul warm with charity; but it was wilful though I did not know. It loved to choose where it should go, and it turned from the low and common things. So I fell, and those I loved with me. Hear, daughter, how !

‘I was a poor priest, who had been a poor scholar and a student; I had lived with poverty all my life, and all my life I had loved her; putting away from me the desires of living, the lust of the eyes, and even at last the mind’s desire of knowledge. I gave up every one and came here to live in that little

room over the porch yonder, vowing myself to God Almighty's service and the care of His people in all charity. So for many years, as time goes in the world, I herded their poor souls like a flock of silly sheep, and every day it seemed that my charity grew more and more: yet for one thing I had no charity at all, nor any pity, and that was for the body which clothed me in those days. I hated it, tormenting it until the creature almost ceased from being, and at length I put all thought of it away from me, so that it was as 4 0

dead as the poor thing they buried in the tomb years ago. I was very happy in those days; and besides my service the people gave me a return of the love I spent on them, more and better, I now believe, than ever I gave. But over and above all this, it was allowed me to bestow of that store of learning I had so much treasured on two youths I loved more than sons. They lived in the manor house which stands over away in the fields, as you go by the chantry-house and the fish-ponds, and so by the mill. I served in their father's chapel there besides. He was a good friend to me and to many another.

'From the time that they were very little lads until the moment when they grew to be fine, tall youths they came to learn at my side; and very quick of wit they proved, besides being skilled and active in more manly pastimes.

Yet always they loved me and my books; and though I was ever careful to keep my heart humble as regards my service towards them, be it known, daughter, that I fell into the sin of a more subtle pride. For the learning of which, in myself, I would not be proud, yet in them I beheld with a most uplifted and complacent mind. They were scholars that would have done far better masters credit.

'Now above all the matters that I taught these young men, I prided myself upon the manner in which I had treated of the body and the things pertaining thereto: how that it was a poor thing and mean, to be despised and overlooked, to be trampled on if need be, but better far to be utterly neglected and forgotten. And they being young and hardy, like the animals of the woods, were as little conscious of the meaning of my words as the animals themselves might have been; yet always it seemed that they followed my teaching. For never have I seen young things who troubled so little for the satisfying of their own desires, whatever they might be. For all that they were well-grown, comely, strong and well liked by their fellows. And the happy

time we four had in those days—their father, themselves, and me.

‘I mind me that almost the last time we sat together was when they were both on the point of setting out in the world, each one appointed as esquires in the service of some lord. I doled them out the same words of advice as I had been wont to do, and very earnestly did they say them after me, commending me for a wise teacher and one to be obeyed with a whole heart. Then away they went, and for some years we saw them no more, their father and I; and the news which came of them was scant indeed, though good, and enough to make glad those who cared for the two young men.

‘It came about one hot summer, when the whole earth lay parched with heat under an unwinking sun, that messages arrived at the manor house that both young men would be home in the winter to keep Christmas once more under their father’s roof. As you may guess, daughter, there was joy for all of us in those words. But the summer that year lay heavy on the land, and it seemed hard to believe that winter could ever come. The people well remembered that season, for more fervent prayers in church went up for rain, behind their curses in the fields upon the drought, than at many a Lenten fast-day service. And there were strange rumours abroad, and terrors by night and day among the shepherds on the hills; and even my dreams as I slept were much troubled and full of ill omens: so that often I got up from my slumbers and went down into the church to pray.

‘The summer went slowly enough and faded into an autumn as parched as the season before it, and so sank into winter. Still there were strange tales told upon the hillside, and men said that queer things came between them and the stars o’ nights. It wore on to Christmas. The brothers might come on any day or at any moment. Many’s the time their father and I would sit listening only, and never speaking one word, just to catch the sound of their awaited feet. We sat so together on an evening—there was but one more between us and the Eve itself—whilst the people were busy about preparing for the feast, laughing and talking: when suddenly there came a silence upon them as upon us, and the sound of a man crying out. And he was calling on the Holy Mother and Saint Michael for help. So I went down into the hall whence came all this clamour, and through all the people all crowded about the man where he stood screaming, with a great horror on his face. He was one of the

herdsmen off the hill. I blessed him in the name of God, His Son, and our Lady, and presently he became still so that I could question him. But he could tell little; only that he had met with a great and terrible thing on the downs, which he could not describe in form, but which passed with a great roaring and rushing like the dragons of old time. So I commended him to our patron St Michael and left him. Yet there was no news of the brothers, and I came back here to my room in the porch.

‘Benediction was said, the curfew-bell had rung, and you could feel the Christmas peace fallen upon all the town. I bolted the church door, and had just tended the light upon the altar, I was even on my knees at prayer, when there came a loud rattling at the door below my chamber. Great blows fell upon it, then the voice of some one crying anguishfully in the name of our Lord; then again came silence. I was so stricken to the heart with terror that I could not move; and yet all the while I knew the voice. It was that of the youngest brother. At length the coward that I was drew near to the door and asked who called; but no answer came. I was afraid to open. It was exceeding dark all around me, and upon me was the remembrance of my ill-omened dreams.

‘It may have been a long space, or a short, as time goes, when I said a prayer and undid the door. The door opened inwards. As I drew it towards me the figure of a man kneeling crouched against it fell forward at my feet. I lifted him up as well as I was able for the weight of his body, and dragged it into the light of my lantern. It was indeed the younger brother, but he was quite dead, with the blood pouring out of him from many wounds—out upon the pavement of the porch, down the steps into the church.

‘A horse whinnied at the churchyard gate, some other answered. There were sounds of quick, heavy feet upon the path, and then a man’s tall figure came in between me and the dark sky. He came forward, snatching the lantern out of my hand. He turned the light upon us, but while he did this, he also was illumined: it fell first upon his soiled and muddy clothes, then on his bloodstained hands, and at last upon his dreadful face. Yet it was the elder brother; I had known him from the first moment, though my faith refused him such belief.

‘He looked at us for a while silently, in a kind of rage, and there were tears of

anger in his sunken eyes: then slowly, deliberately, he cursed me where I stood, so that the tongue clave to the roof of my mouth in anguish and dread. I could say nothing for sorrow. Then presently, 'My son!' I said. At that he dashed the lantern down upon the ground, so that I looked for death itself; but instead I felt his breath low upon my hands, and he was kneeling before me by the body of his murdered brother. Before I could well hear what his low voice said he was confessing all his sins. Heavy they were, daughter, and not few. Yet for every sin he owned, meseemed mine only was the fault and the shame. It seemed to me also that his curse had not fallen on me, but mine on him; for the deeds he had done were of my sowing, and so I might know surely they would truly be absolved.

'At first all had gone well with him in the world: God and his fellows had been good to him, and his wishes were fulfilled before he well knew what they might be. So he went on prospering and beloved. But at length desire in a dark form met him by the way, and he fell without knowing how he got his fall, for I had blinded his eyes with beauty and he could not tell truth.

Then finding all I had said ill-matched to his new shameful knowledge, he cursed me in his heart for a fool, and went his ways.

'Even so all might have been righted, if from one desire he had not passed unto another: but this time there stood something between it and him; and that which stood between was no other than his own flesh and blood—his younger brother. (The Lord knows how *he* had fared; but I think not so badly by my means.) Still it came about that they purposed to spend the Christmas season with their father together, and, if it might be, to find some peace from their discords. Yet ever while they rode the elder brother grew more and more wroth, until they came unto the midst of the downs. It chanced that they were talking of indifferent matters, but the elder's bitter spirit found a means to chafe his brother; and from words, they say, it is a short road to blows. So it was now. He set upon his brother with such weapons as he had to hand. The other defended himself for awhile, but he was overcome with surprise and dismay.

'He spoke wild words of how some monstrous, flying thing came between them at the end—a creature scaled and winged: how his brother spurred his horse away into the valley to the church; and how he followed, still mad with

fury. But to me there could be no monster more terrible than the image of his own hideous desire and rage: for is not that always the dragon which Saint Michael treads underfoot?

‘I gave him what comfort I might, and he rode off into the darkness, nor did we ever see or hear of him again. I was left solitary with his secret and my own. That was a dark and sad Christmastide. Mercifully their father was a very aged man: he had not many years in which to count his only half-known sorrow. As for me, I prayed that a long time on earth might be given me in which to atone, and to preach other and better wisdom, a greater truth.

For if we have not charity for this poorest creature, for what shall we have it?

and if we may not give it to God, being too small a gift, may we not consecrate it in sacrifice and so leave it always beside the altar-stone ? But soon I died, and there are no words left for me to say. Only, daughter, of your charity, pray . . . of your charity . . . pray . . .’

If there had been a disturbance of the silence it had ceased. The sun had passed from the battered brasses; the weaving of strange lights and shadows had all gone. There was nothing in the church but the girl alone.

VI

Strange Conversation Between Two Chairs

ARMSTRONG AND THE BOY walked home very quickly, urged on by the former's newly-awakened curiosity. There was still half an hour before lunch-time. None of the family were about. The house was utterly silent and seemingly unoccupied. It wore a more communicative mood now that Aunt Ellen was not present. The difference her personality made was rather remarkable. Armstrong proceeded to the library with feelings of relief. That also was tenantless. He warmed himself before the fire.

Like all the other rooms in the house, it was notably wanting in personality; it revealed nothing of tastes or inclinations. There were not even any photographs. Looking round desperately for traces of the departed mistress of the place he found no answering sign there. Aunt Ellen obscured everything, for even in her absence the very chair she sat in loomed up like a shadow of herself in the window. It seemed that she had commanded it to be moved away from its position beside the hearth, and now it stood half turned towards the wintry slopes outside; beside it, and confronting it in confidential fashion, another smaller chair. Aunt Ellen's chair had a tall straight back that curved round in wings at the side, but despite its rigid appearance it was still comfortably padded, so well padded that only a small person could have been happy within its encircling frame. The other chair was a nicely-proportioned circle with the necessary segment omitted; it was as like Mr Delane-Morton as a chair could be, with that air of engaging confidentialness about nothing whatever. A cushion sliding off the polished seat still bore the impress of his not inconsiderable weight. The arm of his chair touched the arm of Aunt Ellen's, but all the same it had taken a sudden angry curvet to one side, which looked as if he had pushed it back on some uncontrolled irritation in rising. It would be impossible for the imperturbable chair on which Aunt Ellen sat to be moved in such a fashion.

Those two inanimate things seemed still to be holding the echo of a

conversation. Armstrong could almost hear the wooden words. The one suave and thin, but how determined, the other with a show of firmness, rising into unabated irritation, and losing itself in empty expectations. Then, when expostulations failed, a despairing effort towards retreat with a fiery dignity that could not, alas! but be pompous in its own despite. The chairs could not be quit of the subjects of their conversation.

At first they were talking about Arthur and his career; Mr Delane-Morton, with his almost womanish instinct, pleading for his offspring, but gradually won round to the point of view from which it could be manifestly seen that no Morton ever worked for his living: he merely supplemented his allowance by choosing one of three careers. But why choose the Church when the boy disliked it so particularly? urged the smaller chair, its cushion sliding more and more askew in agitation.

Because there was a living in the Morton gift most opportunely, and what a lot you can save in that way, returned the other with a solid conviction.

The smaller chair did not combat the need of saving: the edges of its cushion were too obviously worn. It looked with heated earnestness at the other's well-appointed padding, and its envy rose to wrath.

There were angry words spoken to which Armstrong had no cue. Perhaps the worn cushion reproached the well-preserved padding for its appearance, and asked it to sacrifice some of its sleekness for the general credit of the Mortons, and of Arthur Morton in particular. There certainly was a plenshed firmness about the padding of that greater chair which affirmed some substance. The significance did not strike one all at once: at first it seemed only an outside adornment, but now one saw that it had more solid foundation.

There was almost an aggressiveness about its affluence viewed from such a standpoint; before it had seemed discreet enough. That there should be power in an armchair is an evident absurdity, but it has a negative strength of resistance which might equally justify the word. At this moment it did not appear to deny the force which up to now it had kept tactfully in the background, unobtrusive. It had cunning then, too, that greater chair, it was provocative besides. Other qualities it had beneath the bland smoothness of

its covering which the vacant polish of the other's wooden surface did not allow. But still the smaller chair was constructed of solid wood, whereas this chair was merely a frame padded with horse-hair. A splinter from the wood were sufficient to cut holes in the softer substance. The question was—could the wood splinter? The greater chair was scornful of its neighbour, despising it through the course of many years, during which period that smaller chair had come more and more within its shadow.

A door banged in the distance, and Armstrong started; the chairs had suddenly turned monumentally silent. They were furniture again, not prototypes. He wondered why he should have thought they spoke as antagonists at all. It was the effect of this curious house upon him, where nothing was open or real.

The gong for luncheon sounded, and the whole family appeared from their several quarters. There was a chastened air about Mr Delane-Morton that throughout the meal plunged him into absent-minded lapses, from which he seemed to recover with extreme difficulty. Arthur was silent as usual, but a little more morose. Miss Josephine crumbled her bread nervously, looking less approachable than ever before. Aunt Ellen and Godfrey alone appeared to have preserved a state of satisfaction within themselves conducive to sociability. They both bore on their countenances that kind of underlying self-gratulation which almost makes for radiance in a face: their affairs this morning had evidently prospered. Armstrong, remembering the scarlet garment, wondered how much effect it had produced in rendering the young man so benign. When the domestics' services were dispensed with there was nothing he would not do in the way of waiting on everyone else. He seemed bitten with a mania of attentiveness which was really overpowering. Nothing could stop him except the conclusion of the meal. It was two o'clock before Armstrong managed to evade them all and escape upstairs to the gallery, and the door which led on to the downs. The two wild wood-creatures leered at him with sympathetic benevolence.

VII

The Story of the Stone

AT LENGTH HE WAS FREE; in his haste he forgot to shut the door of the gallery behind him, and the cold air gushed out after and along with him up the green slopes outside. It was riotous within him, and riotous without along the short grass, boisterous among the dark racing clouds. There was a shadow from the clouds that ran across the sward under his feet and went quickly in advance of him to the summit of the ascent, rose to the ridge and vanished away on the other side of the crest out of sight. The downs were a perfect mirror to the expansive heavens. The wonderful air filled him through and through with that same feeling of eternal youth, eternal age that he had caught in St. Michael's church—that same winged feeling and quickening of every part which was like an inrush of new life and power. He could feel the extraordinary thing invading him as it invaded the whole hillside. He let himself be swept away upon its tide. It were inconceivable that such a force should be pent up in any house or building made with hands.

By this time he had come to the white chalk path that cut up from the left-hand and plunged into the plantation, turning back again elbow-wise to slant upwards to the very summit of the down. He followed it. It was not until he set foot inside the plantation that he wondered at himself for having given that sensation a distinct personality of its own. It seemed strange now that he was within shelter of the trees, that he should have regarded it as anything but the effect upon himself of the exhilarating atmosphere. And yet that he now tried to deny its existence added proof of that personality's appearance. Then why had he matched it with the sensation in St. Michael's church? No, he was on the downs now, and would only think about the fine effect upon eye and mind that such a noble picture presented.

He was almost at the top: he would not look around or behind him until the summit was attained. The face of the down was rounded here, like the side of a giant sandcastle made by a giant pail, or else it was the end of some titanic

bastion. Panting, he achieved the last strides quickly, and turning gazed around. He could have shouted for joy. The world for centuries lay stripped bare about him. In the whole of England he had never seen Nature so frankly self-confessed. His heart went out to her. And not Nature alone was thus revealed, but the history of man for thousands of years written visibly upon the face of the earth. He felt himself sinking down wave-like abysses into darkness, and tossed up again on wave-like mountains into light.

The years he saw were so old that they could not be numbered. When he contemplated them the world grew dark: he could not see it in the sun; it emerged out of chaos with the rumour and shadow of a horror still upon it.

Something within him crumbled and vanished, whilst a hideous cold terror grasped him by the throat. The Unknown appeared in a vision to primeval man. The wave lifted him again.

Again he was Armstrong, scanning Nature's page with a discerning eye.

The lines and outlines of that scene were all noble, all significant with many meanings. In front, where the land lay low, the lakes and swamps had lain; and there, where a jagged hill rose abruptly from the plain, you could tell how the erosion of time and tide had carved it asunder from the main chain of the chalk-ridge. But on either hand how little had the country changed. It rolled and curved, swooped and rose, with the heavy motion of vast waters checked by their own volume; and no water could have so reflected each change and mood of the sky. Behind him for miles upon miles the great ocean of the downs swept away out of sight, and so they did on either hand.

Since a remote day in his youth, when he had first realised a hill as the result of some gigantic thought, he had not felt such exhilaration or excitement.

He was standing in the folds of a Saxon camp; to his left the straight lines of a Roman road cut clean through a wood of leafless trees. Below lay the mediaeval village, and the road which ran there spoke of travellers of so recent a date that they seemed his own kith and kin. Behind him along the top of the ridge a third road ran, marked with a milestone, saying that in the year 1792 men had counted here a hundred miles from London. The presence of his own century came upon him with a sudden shock that struck him cold.

He felt suddenly immeasurably old and alien, tired too. It seemed as if he had gone hungering down many ages.

On the blue headland of a hill, where brown trees shrouded it and green fields spread before, the dismantled site of a great convent still looked out towards the plain; and back again the grass-grown hillock—all that remained of a medieval castle—returned its stare. Perhaps he had more traffic with them; but nothing to be reckoned compared with the old tales of the down.

To his right—westward—he started off to walk along the straight way of the downs, going along the old Roman road in its covering of woodland, far away into a distance that seemed familiar yet unknown. He went very quickly with a light step, and the darkness began to come over him once more.

Turning a little inland, the valley became lost to sight; now there was not a single house except one grey farm, which lay at the end of a row of twisted elms in a dimple of the ground. It had such a wise forlorn look that Armstrong coveted its ownership. To be so alone in possession of such secrets, being free to peruse them all the year through, pleased his imagination. He wished his fate had placed him there instead of in Burton Hall. ‘Some day,’ he said to himself, ‘I will go there and grow incomparably wise.’ There were brown ploughed fields around it, and fields where some sheep grazed; but it had a poor appearance which gave it also an air of asceticism. That pleased him too.

Some queer thorn-bushes with fantastic shapes supplied a sense of the humorous; the wind had evidently disported itself amongst them; they made game of themselves along the shelving sides. A touch of colour too moved out across the green. The woman of the scarlet garment—a cloak which billowed in the wind—walked up the avenue and vanished into the house.

She pleased his eye: he wondered a little about her before the farm was lost to sight.

A few more ploughed fields remained to be skirted, and then the open down lay before him. True there were some enclosures of wire-fencing, but they lost themselves amongst the prevailing green. Although there was no track visible to the eye, his feet did seem to be following some trodden way; even

the retaining surface of the chalk preserved no trace, and yet he felt convinced of following some road. The trend of the downs led upwards, he was always mounting, and the horizon grew wider and bluer and more luminous. A kind of vague lustre lay upon them all, clearer or lighter about the edges, deepening in blueness as their curves descended. The imagination could not have conceived such a variety in lines: they had almost become rhythmic, like harmonies in a score—well scored indeed.

There was no sign of a human creature anywhere on the face of the land now, only these rhythmic curves of earth swelling and falling, until a muted sound seemed to rise out of them like the voice of a crowd deadened by long distance: it clamoured in his ears and yet there was nothing. He knew, too, that he had command of a most complete sanity. At first the sound seemed far behind him, but gradually it gathered volume on every side, coming from right and left—north, south, and west, he was invaded by the strange rumour; only eastward there was silence and a sensation of tense expectancy with quiet. It might only have been the blood throbbing in his temples but it was not. He must have gone some miles, for he was walking at a great pace, when the ground before him sloped suddenly down into a wide valley—the place where a river had been. On the slope opposite a rough terrace was scored slantwise in the meagre grass spread across the chalk's surface. It lay there like a huge scar, cut from the summit of the opposite incline almost to the foot of the slope, but stopping where the bank of the stream must once have been.

Armstrong recognised it at once: one of the old cattle-tracks, worn by the continual passing of innumerable herds coming to water at the stream below that hill. The hill on this side had a somewhat strange shape, evidently moulded by the hands of that ancient race rather than by the mere forces of nature: it might have been a primitive outpost, or a safe place where the cattle could be kept from invading hordes of men or wild beasts. He strode down the valley and up the track on the other side. It seemed as if the herds had only passed a moment ago, having merely vanished out of sight over the crest. And again the sound of roaring voices assailed him on all sides; this time the presence of multitudes was more pronounced, though the noise was just as dim. He was suddenly confronted with the sense of an extraordinary fear.

It had grown up within him unaware. It belonged to something within him that was as old as the track by which he walked, and with which his normal self had no contact whatever. It could not be controlled by reasons, however argued. He was tossed from heat to cold, blinded, deafened. The ground began to sway under his feet, the very sky trembled about the hill-waves on the horizon; his very life seemed to be torn out of him in aching pain. His thoughts crumbled into ashes at one blow, and left him helpless. There was no foothold for his mind, it stood naked, disarmed, trembling before this enormous fear. It was old and rude as the scarred hills, but it was vital and imminent.

He could not see the country as he had seen it an hour ago: the face of it was changed. With the eyes of fear, that was becoming horror, he saw the entire place teem and heave with life; the air stung bitinglly with its bitter force. The earth seemed about to cry aloud. He had never felt such intense agony surround him on every side. It smelt of blood.

Armstrong had now ascended the hill, and beyond the downs rolled gently in mild undulations like little floating islands: but they too swayed on the vast undercurrent of terror. He fled onwards, the trend of the ground carrying him upward with it: there were always more and more hills to climb.

Now in front of him there rose a great earthwork with a crumbled ditch between; it sprang up against the sky showing gnarled edges, like the knuckles of a clenched fist. He knew that he must enter that place, and yet he was more afraid than ever. Again earth and sky swayed about him. In the distance the downs showed almost prismatic with that illumined whiteness which contains all colour.

He climbed the ditch and the bank beyond. there was a second, and again a third. This three-fold enclosure endowed the place with a feeling of assured security and reserve which was in some way stronger than if it had been set about with the greatest masses of masonry. There was, besides, a shuddering silence or vacuity that waited—and waited for what?

The space which the trenches enclosed formed a large and almost regular square: it did not appear to be cut according to the trend of the ground or the shape of the hill summit, but was rather cast at an angle, slantwise, as if with

an intention. In the centre the ground suddenly sank in a hollow, as if it had fallen in upon the removal of some object once embedded there—just as a grave might when the coffin is displaced. There was a deep notch cut in the earthwork eastward, and a straight line could have been drawn from notch to hollow. In a flash Armstrong saw what was wanting to that cavity—a stone.

In a flash, too, he saw why the place lay so. It was strictly orientated. Eastward the downs swung forward in deeper folds, and the swing of that fear swept eastward also as down a long avenue: and yet there were no stone lines.

Armstrong did not know where he stood with regard to Salisbury Plain, but he felt certain that Stonehenge lay facing that notch in the earthwork, however many miles away. He did not name the place in his mind, but he saw it suddenly upsprung as a temple to that strange horror and that immense vitality which surged from the spur of the down at Burton, swept on through this dead stronghold, and culminated in Stonehenge. It was winged, and it was shadowed with its wings. In the church they had called it St Michael—it was gentle in the valley: but here, where it was unchecked and free, where men had been virile enough to clutch at its robe in passing, to partly comprehend and catch it, to lay even a hand upon its power and curb something of its strength to their outreaching wills, it swooped and circled like a giant eagle, rushed and eddied like a torrent released. At this moment it had sped on somewhere across the down, and its absence was almost more terrific than its presence; for the heart felt a suspense within that turned its blood to water. That such a thing could be! He could not tell how he had arrived at his knowledge, he knew only that it was true. A place too where generations of men had stood in similar terror was not a thing unendowed with meaning: their fear was trebly communicable for its formlessness, its quiet, and its incomprehensibility.

Thoughts in his mind clashed and jangled together disconnectedly, as snapped wires of a stringed instrument; yet some strange current of meaning made half tunes and harmonies amongst them. Again they seemed joined and knotted together. Some strong hand gripped them and struck one crashing chord across the strings: one terrific thought that caught the meaning of two thousand years or more, wrought up the present with the past, and hurled it

into the finite world like a menace or a challenge.

That ancient, prehistoric race had caught this winged thing and used it as a curse upon the downs. Sacrificing to it themselves, they had willed that the people coming after should sacrifice also, although they were long exiled and turned to dust. The curse of a conquered race was intended to haunt the ways of the conquerors. The people, who owned these lands that had been theirs, should pay the toll in blood and tears which they had rendered piously though in fear: brother slaying brother, or brother slaying sister—a prehistoric right of heriot upon each succeeding generation. There was the strangely jumbled history of the two brothers as told by Aunt Ellen, both showing now as true, one in the last century, the other in the century before. And then the century before that again. This strange story of Isabella of the downs. The weird chain of evidence linked itself across the ages. The circling horror had swooped off across the downs for the moment, waiting its hour. It was drawing near—the winter solstice—Christmas. Up here, alone in this place of fear, he could credit the thing truly enough—the blood toll for every century to be paid punctually by the timing of the sun, at some spot upon the downs, the demesne lands of those long-forgotten seigneurs. Something of the terror vanished now that it had descended to the concrete; it could be touched, dealt with, perhaps prevented even.

At this moment he realised that he was not alone: a woman in black had come over the trenches and stood near him, watching. She startled him before he realised that she was only Josephine Delane-Morton—Ape's-face.

Out here, in this place of strange shapes and subdued lights, under the bleak control of winter clouds and shadows, her ugliness became comprehensible.

Her features were not the features of the present race of men, they were not intended to compare with the hybrid breed of modern folk; they belonged to the older, stranger peoples who once inherited that land. The low forehead, with its dark projecting brows, the forceful jaw, the bright black eyes—all these should have proclaimed her to any discerning glance as a throw-back to an extinct species.

She looked at him with a slow smile, as if she had long ago seen what he had just perceived, and had come to hear his version of her tale. Her arms were

folded one across the other, in a patient, waiting attitude, her elbows resting in the palms of her hands. Her eyes had seen evil and good, they had looked on beauty and horror alike; they had summed up either side and judged, or held judgment balanced, suspended.

‘When did you know?’ said Armstrong.

‘Two months ago—that is why I came home. But I did not realise until this morning in church,’ she said. Of course her voice could sound no otherwise than huskily, speaking a foreign speech.

‘You came home to stop it!’ he cried.

‘If I can,’ she said; ‘but who else will believe?’

‘You must tell them.’

She laughed.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘do you think they have called me Ape’s-face so long for nothing? Who could believe me?’

‘And why should they believe me either?’ Armstrong reflected. ‘Probably when we get again into the valley I shall forget too.’

‘Naturally,’ she agreed, ‘and yet it will happen—if we do not prevent it.

It has always happened in a way any of them could explain; why should it not be stopped in the same fashion?’

‘And you?’ he asked.

‘I?’ she repeated, and then stopped short.

‘Yes, you.’

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘when you say that it does seem incredible, indeed: but probably it seemed just as incredible to all the rest until they had done the thing. But still,’ she added, ‘I should recognise what the feeling meant when

it came: the others were blinded. I have been honest with myself always.

Sometimes I think that is why people hate me. I never once pretended for myself—and I never once pretended for them either; they see themselves as I see them, and it doesn't please.'

'No,' said Armstrong, 'you showed me an unpleasant portrait of myself yesterday evening, when we drove up from the station.'

'I liked you best when you were silent,' she replied. 'Shall we go down?'

'I wonder what we shall talk about when we get there?' he said.

'But remember,' she urged, 'that even then this is real—the most real thing you will ever meet.'

'I shall think of this sunken stone,' he answered, 'and the story.'

'The truth of it,' she interrupted.

'Are you coming?'

'Oh no,' she said, 'not yet, not yet!'

She wrung her hands in an odd kind of way. 'Please go on. I cannot face them so soon.'

'I thought you weren't afraid,' he returned, eyeing her closely.

'Of this—no! But of them,' she replied, 'I am afraid. This is real, I can see and feel it: but the others . . . what is there to understand?'

'Come and find out.'

'Presently,' she said and turned eastwards.

He left her there, and as he went the terms of that age-long compact with a power but half comprehended rang in his ears—that brother should kill brother, or sister, as a perpetual sacrifice to this ancient spirit.

VIII

The Red Summer

IT WAS RATHER AFTER FIVE O'CLOCK when Armstrong made his appearance in the drawing-room for tea. The darkness and cold had grown so intense out of doors that he was almost thankful for the garish light and warmth of the room. As he had foreseen, that recent scene on the downs became inconceivable at once. He began to wonder if Ape's-face might not be ever so little, if not exactly unsound of mind, perhaps a trifle eccentric. He allowed that he himself had been somewhat unbalanced; at least one might call it so.

Aunt Ellen beckoned him into the chair beside her and made a special feature of handing his tea-cup with almost affectionate affability. Her hands, and her manner of managing them, were skilful and charming. It was evident that she admired and appreciated him in her own way, and this, too, warmed him. The older you get the more warmth you require; and though of course he was barely middle-aged (save the ungracious epithet!) still perhaps he felt sometimes an extra involuntary chill that needed mitigation.

‘Do you think we shall have an abnormally cold Christmas?’ she chirruped.

‘We old people feel the frost and snow much more than ever you young people can imagine. So you can guess what a boon that extraordinary heat-wave must have been to me. I felt as if new life and strength had sprung up in me. Dear Godfrey used to carry me out into the garden, and I used to sit on the grass and literally feel the heat from the earth steal up me through the scorched blades. And they were scorched indeed! The entire country looked as if a fire had passed over it, did it not? You know—but do not laugh at me too much!—I feel as if it must have some special meaning. Now if you laugh at me I shall not be able to speak again for quite a long time.’ She put her head on one side and blushed quite prettily. Armstrong denied the least inclination to deride her fancy.

‘That might easily be,’ he said.

‘Oh, thank you,’ she returned softly. ‘Dear Godfrey said the shadowed parts of the downs were the only cool spots on the earth’s surface; didn’t you, 5 6

Godfrey ? He used to spend all his time there when he was not attending to his old aunt, didn’t you, dear ?’

Godfrey, looking a little sheepish, acknowledged the fact. The two brothers were sitting opposite to one another, facing Armstrong, and in the common occupation of eating looked more alike than usual. Somehow at mention of the downs they both showed signs of mental abstraction.

A pause here ensuing, Armstrong struggled to break it by remarking on the lonely farm.

‘Now there,’ he said, ‘is a place where I should like to spend my last days.

What is the place called ? I really must not forget it.’

‘How very amusing you are, dear Mr Armstrong,’ the old lady chuckled; ‘it is called—’ She suddenly hesitated, and he saw her eyelids flicker in a curious manner. He noticed that she had glanced covertly at the two young men. He too turned to look at them. They were both sitting bolt upright glaring at him. ‘It is called the Drylches,’ the old lady concluded; ‘rather a curious name, is it not?’

‘Very curious,’ Armstrong agreed, turning his eyes carelessly away again.

‘Does it mean anything?’

‘We sometimes wonder,’ the old lady replied suavely, and Armstrong noticed the same covert glance in her nephews’ direction. ‘The boys can tell you more about it than I, no doubt; you see I so seldom get upon the downs.’

She turned to them gently with a questioning look which suggested their joining in the conversation. Armstrong followed her example. It was at this moment that Ape’s-face came quietly into the room and sat down very unobtrusively in the background, but facing the entire group. She had a

curious way of surveying people as though they were actors on a stage, that always struck Armstrong every time she entered.

Godfrey, with curiously elaborate nonchalance, was replying to his aunt that the place was so dreary he seldom went that way. Arthur, on the contrary, with flaming face and eyes, scowled on Armstrong as he muttered:

‘Can’t see why anyone should want to go near such a rotten old place.’

Godfrey suddenly looked at his brother with his slow good-tempered smile, as suddenly at least as his supple undulating movements would allow.

‘Oh, is it very rotten?’ he asked in his maidenly way.

Arthur immediately transferred the scowl from Armstrong to his brother.

Armstrong noticed how strongly the difference in the two was heightened by their very identity.

‘Perhaps you know more about it than I do,’ he said, fiercely suspicious.

Godfrey smiled at him. ‘The truth is,’ he continued to Armstrong, ‘that we neither of us know much about the place. The farmer there is rather a rough, unpleasant fellow, and looks on everyone who goes near the place as a trespasser. But if you are interested in old farmhouses, sir, there is a very quaint one in the hollow . . .’ He went on for some minutes in this communicative style, enlarging with a certain amount of superfluous knowledge upon ancient buildings in general, until he saw that boredom was pervading the atmosphere, when he gently desisted, and left the conversation at a far distant point from whence it started. Mr Delane-Morton had been too deeply immersed in some lugubrious meditation of his own to notice this small but curious disturbance. But Ape’s-face seemed determined that the subject should not pass away so easily.

‘Artists very often stay up there in the summer,’ she said in the same determination with which an anarchist might throw a bomb. Aunt Ellen turned a disapproving glance upon her which would have frozen anyone less firm.

‘It always seems queer that artists should like anything so grey and colourless.’

‘It is not grey or colourless,’ rejoined Arthur, flaming, ‘I can tell you there are any amount of fine tones in the folds of the downs: only it takes a better eye than mine or yours to see them. But if any genius got up there she—he’d soon show you what I mean,’ the slight slip might have passed almost as a hesitation, it was so slight, but Aunt Ellen held it up to view.

‘Dear Arthur,’ said she, ‘how glad I am to see that you can imagine one of our sex could really possess genius.’

He looked at her angrily, perplexed, crimson from brow to chin. Then he dashed his cup down upon the table so that it rattled together with the spoon in his saucer.

‘I don’t understand,’ he said shortly, rose, and walked sulkily out of the room.

‘And he was such a pretty child,’ Aunt Ellen sighed after him.

‘You must agree with me, or contradict yourself, Mr Armstrong, that the past is far more pleasing than the present.’

‘But the future far more pleasing than either,’ interposed Godfrey.

Mr Delane-Morton had recovered consciousness with the noise of Arthur’s exit. He here raised his voice.

‘Not at all, not at all,’ he said solemnly, ‘I dislike the future intensely. No man of my age who thinks could possibly do otherwise. A man who did not think . . .’ and he left the lamentable state of such a man to be rather vaguely imagined than described.

‘On the contrary, John,’ Aunt Ellen retorted, ‘I rather agree with dear Godfrey; the future is most pleasing because . . .’

‘It depends,’ said Mr Delane-Morton, rising also, ‘whether you are in the position of debtor or creditor to old Time.’

With which cryptic utterance he departed. They were now left a snug little 'partie carrée,' as Aunt Ellen smoothly put it, which she wished to break up with Mr Armstrong's consent; for although it was quite dark she intended to show him the house, to make up for the time he had spent away from them in the afternoon, and so that he might not be bored with having waste time on his hands. Armstrong sighed inwardly when he thought of the letters still unread which he purposely had come to see: they lay awaiting him in his own room, so Mr Delane-Morton had informed him.

'You have seen all the rooms on the ground-floor,' she said, 'but to my mind the first floor is the most interesting.' (Armstrong forbore retorting that attics and kitchens had often proved more to the point than any other parts of old houses.) 'So if you will await me at the stair-head, Godfrey and Pym shall carry me up, and then I can guide you myself in my little wheeled carriage. I often think that feeble people like myself help to shew the wonders of our age—exemplars, you know, of the advance of science.' She smiled him to the door.

Obedience is a polite and facile habit. Armstrong went and awaited her at the stair-head.

The place was entirely dark, save for the slight glow mounting up the stairs from the hall; the wonderful carving on the newels and rails was lost in the gloom except where a flash of light endowed them with a flickering motion of fictitious life. The patience of waiting lays all susceptibilities open to the understanding. He was thinking unconsciously of Aunt Ellen as he stood leaning against the walls of the cavern-like landing, opening himself as it were to any impression she might choose to impress upon him. He felt like the men in Plato's pictured cavern, from which only shadows of the real could be seen cast upon the wall: a figure of the limits of human perception.

At that moment he was aware of something, greater than he could comprehend, approaching within the casting of a shade, but looming always nearer and nearer. He heard Aunt Ellen's soft voice calling him from the gallery. He went and found her sitting alone in the wheeled chair, the centre of a splash of light which radiated from a small lamp which she carried in one hand.

‘Come along, dear Mr Armstrong,’ she murmured, and turned the chair dexterously. It was so well contrived that no sound came as it moved on its rubber edges. There was something curious in accompanying this swift footless movement through the house, encircled by that small radius of light in the midst of the cold gloom. She drew her delicate shoulders together in a shiver.

‘How cold!’ she exclaimed, ‘and yet the strength of that summer weather has not left me yet. It leaves me with the impression of something red, as if one had been bathed in red for months and one’s memory could conjure up no other colour. I always call it the Red Summer. How you do make one chatter!

Here am I talking about myself when I really want to tell you all about the house.’ She paused a moment, and then burst with real relish into a long discourse on the Morton pedigree: however dry it might be to Armstrong, to her it was evidently full of matter.

‘That was an interesting story that your niece told me about Isabella Morton and her two brothers,’ Armstrong inserted in the first pause.

‘Which Isabella?’ said the old lady sharply.

‘The author’s sister,’ Armstrong replied, surprised at her tone.

‘A story?’ persisted the old lady. ‘What did Josephine tell you?’

It was evidently unknown to her. Armstrong evaded a direct reply out of some but half-understood loyalty to Ape’s-face. He said:

‘I couldn’t tell a story half so well myself. Story-telling must be an inherited gift,’ and he looked down at her smiling. The smile froze itself inwardly at the roots. He had seldom seen a face change so unpleasantly: she looked like some keen-eyed bird of prey ready to swoop. The lamp trembled slightly in her hand.

‘I wonder what she knows about it,’ Aunt Ellen muttered.

They came to the end of the gallery opposite two folding doors. She turned

herself sideways to the keyhole, so as better to insert the key, and flung the door open. A solitary, disused atmosphere gushed out across the threshold. She glided forward into the darkness with her little lamp.

‘If you follow me closely you can see the pictures quite well, and the ceiling is low enough for the pattern to shew clearly. It is considered handsome.’

She stretched out her thin hand to beckon him nearer. ‘This was once the ladies’ withdrawing-room, which is the reason for this fine plaster work. But my poor sister-in-law used it as her room. The shutters are not often opened now. How well I remember looking at it across the fields. I used to live on the other side of the meadows until my brother kindly asked me to live here with him and his wife. Dear creature! Here she is. A picture painted at the time of their marriage. A trifle older than my brother, but younger by nature. The only child, and her people had petted her a good deal. These petted children seldom attain maturity of mind.’ She held the light towards the wall.

‘Why, it might almost be your niece!’ Armstrong exclaimed. There were the same strange, dark, ape-like features, the melancholy eyes, but within them more melancholy still. Besides there was wanting that forcefulness and intensity which made Josephine’s presence felt.

‘A very different character,’ returned Aunt Ellen, ‘the gentlest soul! But it needed an understanding heart to appreciate her, although she was an heiress.

Dear John understood her worth. I always told him he would. It was hard he should lose her just when he realised her full value! You would be amused to know how diffident they both were. Lying in bed all day as I used, one sees things more clearly. It was I who told John the true state of her feelings. (Out of her kindness she sometimes came and brought me flowers,’ the old lady’s voice became bitter and then peculiarly soft, ‘but she was one of those silent, reserved people whose feelings you must guess.) And then I told her about poor John. She was quite startled, and blushed, poor thing! And then I told John again: and John blushed. So then I had to tell her. It really would seem funny if it were not a little pathetic. If it had not been for me how would these two poor silent souls ever have met? You see invalids have their duties and their strength as well as the hale and hearty, dear Mr. Armstrong.’

‘I’m sure,’ replied he, ‘you have neglected none of your duties.’

‘Indeed, I hope not,’ she answered, moving on towards the shuttered windows, ‘nor have I repined at my want of strength since I was gradually struck down in my early girlhood. But then I have known how to rest on the strength of others.’ She smiled slowly. ‘Shall we open a window and see if there is any moon? How often I used to look across from our windows to these in my childhood, and wonder what lay behind! Little I thought that one day it would be my home,’ she sighed tenderly. ‘No one could love it more than I do.’ She stroked her lean hand along the surface of the curtains—the fingers had a grasping and covetous air. ‘Shall we open a window and see how the country looks in the moonlight?’

When he had thrown back the shutters and thrown up the sash she did not even thank him: she seemed to think that at least part of the act had been her own.

‘Even now,’ she continued, ‘I still feel the wonder of being mistress here.’

Her head could not come much above the level of the window ledge, seated as she was; but she raised herself a little and peered into the darkness.

The air was keen with a black frost, and that curious waiting feeling which hangs about a winter’s night covered the face of the land.

‘It was a pity for John there was not more money with it,’ she said drily and half to herself. ‘Shall we shut the window again? the cold freezes all the life out of one. Really, last summer I felt quite young again. Sometimes nothing seems impossible. But I forget you are not old enough to know. Let me show you the other rooms.’

Armstrong compliantly closed the window, and again followed the gliding chair and its nimbus into various other rooms which owned no particular interest, but in which Aunt Ellen produced some trifling ancient anecdote.

And all the time he pondered on that wisdom or cunning which made her the superior of her brother; having perceived that to buy with money is often to

obtain a shell without the substance, but to buy with your body is to purchase more than a life-interest. Aunt Ellen had made her marriage by proxy. He disliked her more and more as their progress lengthened. At last the tour was completed, and having seen her borne away with triumphant reverence by Godfrey and Pym, he retired to his own room to read.

The letters were not as illuminating as he had hoped, or else he was in no mood for appreciation. The old lady and her tenacious fingers, her insistence on the redness of the summer, her curious version of her brother's marriage, kept intruding between the crabbed lines of the old pages, disturbing his attention. He was still struggling with an untameable inattention when the dressing-gong sounded. He thought with joy how only one more complete day remained to him; perhaps he might possibly escape by the afternoon train tomorrow. Then suddenly the thought of Ape's-face flashed across him, and he felt unutterably mean. Still, it is not to be expected that one should share in every stranger's difficulties. Besides, every stranger might not thank you. There is a time to intrude and a time to retire—tactfully, of course.

Aunt Ellen was in great spirits during dinner; it seemed as if an undercurrent of secret mirth sparkled within her like a hidden spring. Mr Delane-Morton was still most visibly depressed. The others were of course mute. The old lady continued sprightly even after dinner, when the others showed signs of wishing to retire for the night, and Armstrong was again detained from his work by the persistence of her tongue; and yet he could not utterly dislike her.

‘Dear, dear!’ she said at length, ‘do you know that this is the shortest day, and we have actually turned it into the longest by sitting up so late ? Now that is entirely your fault, Mr Armstrong, and I declare I think it very wrong of you to corrupt our simple life.’

‘I was finishing a very interesting paragraph just now in the *Morning Post*,’ Mr Delane-Morton remarked languidly, looking round the corner of a paper which he had not been reading for the last half-hour, ‘all about the shortest day and Leap Year, and the winter solstice. I am not aware that I ever connected them together in my mind before. But it appears that the winter solstice may occur any time between the 21st and the 23rd of December, so that really the shortest day may be any of the three—without our quite

knowing which, unless we are versed in these matters, which, to tell the truth, I cannot profess to be.' At which he got a little breathless, red, and flurried, and, crumpling the paper, rose to assist his sister in her departure from the room.

Armstrong begged leave for another glance at the letters and manuscripts, aware that this would probably be his last chance, little as the others knew.

They all bade him 'goodnight' and left him. But though he was left so undisturbed, the same restless inattention assailed his thoughts, and it was with a keen sense of irritation that he at length flung down the books, and lit a cigarette. A gentle knock at the door made him realise that he had been expecting Ape's-face all the time. A black silk cloak was wrapped tightly around her, showing the shape of her thin shoulders and the angularity of her form.

'There is something in the passage more than the cold,' she whispered, entering and shutting the door softly and with great care behind her. Now that she moved stealthily there was something almost graceful in her manner, in the same way that the lowering of the voice gave it a pleasing tone.

'Nonsense,' said Armstrong shortly.

She smiled slowly, and this time the smile was more feminine. Or rather more human.

'Now you are more like me,' she said, 'now that you are honest. But still there is something about the house. Don't you feel as if it were too small to hold what it contains?' She suddenly looked over her shoulder and shuddered.

They both drew nearer to the fire.

'I know what you mean,' Armstrong conceded reluctantly.

'It began in the summer,' she said, lowering her voice still more; 'do you remember how the heat commenced in May, and how all June it grew, then in July it gathered force until the heat of August was like a heavy red cloud on

the face of the country? The downs seemed to heave in the heat. In the spring there had been a beautiful haze that went up from them like incense round a shrine. It was strange then but sweet. In August it was cruel, like being seared to death. There was something horrible in the atmosphere, as if a terrible thing gathered substance from the dying earth.' Her voice almost faded out. 'At first I only felt it out of doors, but presently it entered the house. In September it lessened a little, the cooler weather came. That was the time I fell ill, and I couldn't notice anything. They said I nearly died. I wished to die.' She said it quite naturally and passed on. 'Then they sent me to Italy for three months. Suddenly I saw what was happening, and I made up my mind to live and come home. Even then I hoped it was all a dream, and that this house would be empty of that thing. I was sorry you were there to disturb my first impressions. That was why I got out at the gate. But as soon as I came into the house the thing was all about us. It had grown all the time I was away. And it seems to have changed the people here too. Aunt Ellen is more cheerful, but so curiously cheerful. And then father! he seems to have become worried and older, like the old woman Aunt Ellen ought to be and is not. Godfrey, too, and Arthur, are quite different in a way. Godfrey used seldom to stir from father and Aunt Ellen; and Arthur used to sit reading in a lump in his chair most of the holidays: now neither of them are ever to be found, so father says. Not that he minds.'

'Surely,' said Armstrong, 'you can explain all this by the mere fact that they are all growing older.'

'I could,' she replied, 'if it were not for Aunt Ellen—who is younger than I have ever seen her in the whole of my life—and for this strange thing in the house. On the downs this afternoon you would not have questioned it.'

'No,' he said, 'and what do you mean to do?'

She pressed her hands together against her brow. 'I want to get the boys away,' she answered,—'you saw them at tea today. What did all that mean?'

There must be some one at the Drylches! I must find out! And yet it may happen tomorrow, or the day after, or even tonight. I can't think what to do.

Somehow I am not afraid for father, and Aunt Ellen is paralysed—she

doesn't count. But the boys!'

'And you,' said Armstrong.

'If they did kill me,' she said, 'I should not mind: except for them. One is as much dead here as if one had never been born.' She did not wait for him to make any comment upon this speech, but continued rapidly: 'Anyway, you are here, and it will not affect you. It's like a miracle your having come just now: some one who understands.'

Armstrong felt guilty; but immediately he laughed at himself for crediting the possibility of such things as the girl suggested.

'I suppose,' she added, 'one will just have to sit and wait.'

'I suppose so,' he agreed, 'but you won't wait up for it all night?'

'You are tired,' she cried, 'I beg your pardon,' and turned away from the fire towards the door. She moved with such softness that for some unreasoned cause Armstrong imitated her, and crossed on tip-toe to open it. His fingers lay about the handle, but they had not actually grasped it when he noticed that she suddenly paused in the middle of the room, listening intently. He stopped in his action at the extraordinary expression on her face. At first there was a white terror on every feature, rapidly followed by the intensest sadness of resignation. She gathered the cloak more closely about her and came on towards the door again, with a curious unseeing look in her eyes which comes to people in pain of mind or body.

It was at this moment, when his grasp had still not tightened upon the handle, that he felt it slowly turned within his fingers as by some person just outside. The latch thus released, the door began smoothly to open inwards.

A strange, cold feeling suddenly went shivering right through him. In a kind of desperate impulse he pulled the door swiftly open, and flung it wide.

There was nothing there except the deepest darkness, and a horrible sensation of emptiness as if something had but just moved away. And yet there was not time for a vanishing between the turning of the handle and his opening of the

door.

He felt the muscles of his jaw slacken, and his eyelids stiffen—Ape's-face was staring at him.

‘Good God!’ he said under his breath, passing his hand across his forehead,

‘I thought . . .’

She came to the threshold and began to pass out of the room. He suddenly laid hold on her arm.

‘Don’t go!’ he said.

‘I am not afraid,’ she replied, and disappeared into the depths of the hall.

For the first time in his life he was not pleased at being left alone.

IX

The Drylches

WHEN ARMSTRONG AWOKE the next morning—second and last of his visit—it was snowing gently, a fine white powder of snow that tinkled against the window panes in falling. A little had drifted in across the sill of his half-opened window, showing that it had begun some time ago: it lay against the glass like diagrams of the rise and fall in wealth or population of a country.

He was just on the point of finishing dressing when Pym knocked tenderly at the door and presented him with the expected telegram. The moment seemed opportune, for he could now enquire about the train-service at his ease. Pym solemnly informed him that a train would leave Bourne End in two hours' time, an express with one stop at Salisbury. Nothing could have suited him more admirably. He gave orders for the packing of his luggage, and descended the stairs nimbly. As he went he found himself hoping that Ape's-face might not be at the table when he announced his departure: her eyes would be a looking-glass for that meanness in himself which he refused to acknowledge. Honesty for breakfast is unsuitable fare and indigestible.

As if Fate meant nothing but smiles for him, he found that only Mr Delane-Morton and Aunt Ellen were at table. They both greeted him with effusion, as the fashion was, and then he broke his sad news. There was a great deal of consternation, real or feigned, but very pleasantly expressed, and the brougham was immediately ordered. Armstrong's one object now was to avoid bidding goodbye to Ape's-face. He really considered no obligation could be reckoned as negotiable on his part, and yet he felt that she had drawn rather freely on his sympathy. It was an unfair position in which to have placed a stranger: a practical man, busy and full of important affairs, could not be expected to plunge into knight-errantry, especially when his youth was no longer in full bloom, and the circumstances so peculiarly visionary. He argued thus with himself whilst consuming his breakfast with

more haste and less wisdom, conversing agreeably with his host and hostess on the vagaries of a literary life, which could so call you from one end of England to another without a moment's warning. They were both quite sympathetic. Feeling himself to be indeed the truly injured creature he had graphically represented, Armstrong soon excused himself on the score of that packing which he trusted was already completed, and vanished nimbly into the shelter of his own apartment, where he hoped for safety until the carriage should be announced for his departure. The greatest relief possessed him upon the accomplishment of this fact, and he found himself being slowly conveyed towards the station, without having set eyes again upon anyone but Mr Delane-Morton, Aunt Ellen, and the two boys.

The pleasure of having triumphantly escaped two more days in the old house made him feel younger and more successful than he had been for years. Even now he could scarcely credit his good fortune, as he looked through the little round window at the back of the carriage, watching the long grey building slowly merge with distance into the longer, greyer, and more overwhelming shape of the downs, flickering curiously in the scattered fall of the snow. They looked significantly remote and visionary under the influence of the shining flakes. And still he felt that some accident might draw him again into that grey place—that the horse would fall and cut his knees, the driver drop dead from his seat, or finally he might miss the train, the line become snowed up and he be forced to seek shelter at the Delane-Mortons' threshold this night also. He vowed fiercely that nothing should make him endure the repetition of such combined boredom, distaste, and incomprehensible terrors.

The snow fell more thickly now, he could not see much from the windows of the dilapidated vehicle, and the inside space was darkened with that curious gloom which comes with a heavy fall. He could not but think of the darkness of two evenings ago and his strange companion. She must have heard long ago of his departure—his flight; he wondered if she would have divined it to be such. He could imagine her penetrating look, and the calm posture in which she would survey it, arms folded and elbow resting on hand. Well, if anything so impossibly strange as she expected should happen, he would be sure to see it through the medium of man's universal friend—

the newspaper-correspondent. He laughed inwardly, and then checked

himself with a feeling of having laughed too soon. Yet they had reached the station and his train was patiently steaming between the platforms. Nothing untoward had occurred, even his luggage had not been left behind.

He had time leisurely to choose a third-class compartment, and the porter having placed his portmanteau beside him, Armstrong was left alone to his own thoughts. The compartment was stuffy, but the disregard of windows as a method of ventilation had not contrived to keep it warm. Yet even this cold was not so piercing as the atmosphere in the rooms of Burton Hall. Now that he was away from Ape's-face he seemed to feel her presence more keenly than ever; the extraordinary honesty of meaning and purpose, which made her so unbending a conversationalist, stood out as a great rarity almost amounting to genius. It made her insight singularly pure, and her convictions vividly true. Her austerity of outlook, action, speech, appeared almost a grace. He acknowledged it in a flash, and just as the train began to move away from the platform, whistling shrilly as it went. It was at this moment—when he suddenly realised the truth that was in her, and consequently the truth of what she was probably about to face, together with the culpable fact of his leaving her alone—that a disturbance of voices made itself audible from the slowly receding station. For an instant Armstrong half hoped it might prevent his departure, and become one of those happy accidents which determine people's actions without their own intervention.

A man's head and shoulders suddenly appeared in the frame of the window, for a second he hung panting on the step, and then, having flung the door violently open, he as violently flung himself down upon the seat opposite Armstrong. Having closed the door after him, and blown his nose in a congratulatory manner on a cheerful-looking handkerchief, he grinned heartily at Armstrong and winked with a white-lashed lid over a very blue eye.

'Warm work that,' said he in a fairly broad speech, 'but I had the start of them, and you can't get much of a foothold in the snow. Left the porter and the stationmaster fairly in the lurch I did!' whereupon he settled himself more comfortably in his coat, which appeared to have been slightly disarranged about the collar. 'It's not often I shave it so fine as that,' he continued, shaking his head, which included a particularly round and pleasant

countenance made shrewd by crowsfeet at the corners of his eyes. 'But I have to let the horse go slow down the hill behind Burton house: a bad bit that in this kind of weather.'

'Pretty bad across the downs this time of the year, I should think,' returned Armstrong, rousing somewhat at this last remark.

'Yes,' said he, 'so it is, and you have to be bred to the place, in my way of thinking, to stand it. My first wife—poor woman! she couldn't bear it long, being a stranger to the place. And yet it's surprising how some that are foreigners, as you might say, take to it. There's a young lady up there now—one of these artists—seems as if she just throve upon it.'

'Do you live at the farm just two miles beyond Burton Hall?' Armstrong asked with growing interest. 'I think they told me it was called the Drylches.'

'That's true enough,' the man said, 'or Lushes, after me and my family.

Some people thinks it looks lonely all by itself up there. But we don't bother ourselves about that, and the pasture is good enough for the flocks, anyhow.

Still, I do always say that you don't know what winter is until you've been up there at Christmas time.'

'No,' returned Armstrong, 'I should think that's very likely,' and then almost involuntarily he heard himself saying: 'You take in guests, don't you?'

'Yes, we do, now and again,' said, the man, eyeing him with some surprise,

'artists and such-like—though I'm sure I don't know what they see in the place. Still, I will say my good woman she makes them comfortable enough

—
fine cook too.' The latter piece of news cheered Armstrong towards the path which he was gradually taking.

'Yes,' continued the farmer, 'we've had some queer ones in our time, not but what they were respectable in their own ways—I'll say that for them—

only a bit touched in the understanding, as some might think. There was one used to come and walk about the fields all day, and parts of the night even, looking for traces of the old people what 'tis said lived here before the Romans.'

'And did he find anything?' Armstrong asked.

'Not he,' said the farmer, 'some old bones, and a flint or two: but he seemed quite pleased, poor gentleman, and after all that kind of thing does no one any harm.'

'I'm interested in that kind of thing myself,' said Armstrong.

The farmer blushed. 'No offence, I hope, I'm sure,' he returned hurriedly.

'None whatever,' Armstrong laughed. 'I suppose you have not a spare room now? I should like to spend Christmas up there and see winter for once in my life.'

The farmer looked a trifle incredulous. 'Would you really now?' he ejaculated.

Armstrong, seeing he was only half-believed, reassured him with all the circumstance in his power; explaining that he was in the midst of some very important discoveries connected with the ancient peoples, but had not liked to thrust himself on Mr Delane-Morton's family circle for Christmas—being such an intimate time. The farmer began to look less doubtful, and finally conceded that there was an empty room, but he didn't know what his good woman might say. Anyhow it was agreed that Armstrong should return with the farmer, when the latter had finished his business in Salisbury that afternoon, and spend at least one night at the Drylches.

Feeling now more than a little virtuous and strangely relieved, he abandoned himself to the delights of scanning the old town and the beauties of the cathedral. 'The bare ruined choirs' of the lime-trees in the close were quite as lovely at this time of the year as the building beside them, and yet that too was exquisite in the low light of the winter's afternoon. The snow had ceased falling at the same moment as they arrived at Salisbury, and a pale sun having

pierced the clouds, Armstrong was enabled to spend the few following hours under fairly pleasant auspices. He still, however, found himself confronted with the mental vision of Ape's-face, which occasioned him to reassure her of his return more than once as though she were there in person.

After a time the accusing countenance appeared propitiated, and the impression on his imagination less vivid. 'I shall soon be able to tell her if there is anything at the Drylches,' he said to himself as the day moved slowly on to the evening. He made the return journey with the farmer, who, far from being the morose and bearish individual of Godfrey's description, proved an honest, friendly soul, much addicted to conversation spiced with a strong sense of humour. He pleased Armstrong.

At Down End station an open trap awaited them into which Armstrong climbed, and his portmanteau being safely ensconced behind, he was once more carried over the road which he had traversed for the first time only two nights before, and even so very recently had hoped with such vigour never to traverse again. He was almost regarding his new move with pleasure and a kind of indefinable excitement—a sort of boyish joy in something done covertly—for he could not allow himself to be seen of the Delane-Morton family until at least a whole day had passed. So he turned up his coat-collar, pulled his hat well over his brows, and trusted to the twilight to obscure him the more.

The snow had not melted on the roads, scarred as they were with the furrows of cart-wheels, for a sharp frost had now set in and the clouds shewed themselves passing away in vast blue columns eastward, leaving a flare of yellow radiance in the west where the sun had rapidly declined, and promising a night of stars. They drove noiselessly through the empty streets of Burton where roofs and thatches lay shrouded in white, and only a few blindless windows glowed orange along seemingly deserted houses. The place looked extraordinarily peaceful and Christmas-like. It only needed one more note in the harmony of hour and atmosphere to make completion perfect.

The deep bells from the church sounded after them as they went, just a few great-toned notes ringing curfew; and then again the more than quietude.

They passed the Hall gates without seeing a soul, and presently, turning a sharp corner, began painfully to mount the downs. The farmer sprang down from his seat and led the horse up the steep slope, making the usual encouraging noises which drivers employ at these arduous moments, during which time Armstrong gave himself up to the extraordinary beauty of the world which lay about them. The higher they mounted the more the wonder grew. The entire impression was as of something transcendently penetrating.

The clearness of space and atmosphere was essentially bell-like, and the curving horizon bent about the surface of the downs was like the arc of some vast dome from which this resonance obtained its quality. The road here was undistinguishable from the turf, all was included and enfolded under one wide, white covering which cast up a pallid glow against the deepening blueness of night. The trees in the valley looked like uplifted canopies of snow, and the copse which shielded Burton Hall from sight wore the appearance of a gigantic baldachin carried on an infinite number of staves.

The village formed a sort of greyish confusion on the white surface, shot through with patches of gold like scattered coins. Not one breath of wind stirred, only a whispering in the telegraph-wires, whose posts, grim and black across the wastes of snow, made a curious undertone. These were the last of civilisation as they plunged deeper and further into the heart of the downs.

The old coaching-road which cut across their own from right to left was buried deep, and hardly showed at all except that it made a sort of breach along the curving outline of a descending slope. A few thorn-trees stood humped under a heavy load. Further on two great haystacks protruded forlornly out of creeping drifts. Then emptiness.

At length the twisted row of dark elms shot up along the sky-line, stark and grim, pointing grotesquely towards the farm house at the end where one light shone. The trees and their shadows upon the snow seemed but a frozen network as the cart drove through their twisted ranks. The farmer pulled up at the door, which soon opened to admit a gay glow against which the stout figure of his wife appeared in an ungainly shape. A few words of explanation having passed between them on Armstrong's account, he was ushered into a sitting-room with friendly sympathy on the cold he must have endured, and there asked to warm himself whilst his chamber was preparing.

The sitting-room was long and low, with windows back and front; at present there was no light in it except what came from a very glowing fire, sufficient to make the place look extremely homely and pleasant. A long, narrow table went down the length of the room, on which was placed a white cloth and covers for one person, to which a maid presently entering laid a second place at the opposite end. The usual self-conscious family-groups, photographed at wedding feasts and the like, were absent from the walls, which were entirely bare of everything except a thick coating of whitewash: this gave it a great sense of repose, allowing full play to the chasing firelight shadows.

He was presently taken by a flight of most uneven steps to his bedroom, which seemed endowed with the same sort of peaceful comfort and cleanliness. It was very far from being the rather ghoulish place which its outside suggested. Supper, he was told, would be served in ten minutes. In ten minutes he descended the erratic staircase, to find the sitting-room in precisely the same state as that in which he left it, saving for the presence of a steaming soup-tureen and plates upon the table, and a large black cat upon the hearth-rug. The firelight was still supreme.

Armstrong had left the door ajar when he came in, and now the sound of voices on the outer doorstep came clearly to him, mingled with more distant noise of clattering pans in the kitchen. One voice was very clear, though soft; it had a laughter-making ring in it which sounded pleasantly out of the darkness. Presently the tones grew a little sharp and hurried. ‘You silly boy!’

it said, and the door shut with a decided bang. Then there were sounds of some heavy object being thrown down on the bricks of the passage, a kind of little low chuckle, and the door was pushed slowly open. A tall girl came in, trailing a scarlet cloak of some thick, warm stuff behind her. When she saw Armstrong on the hearth-rug she stood still and looked at him for a moment with her head on one side—not in the least startled, but merely contemplating him as part of the general furniture of the room. She wore a little black seal-skin cap on her head which came low over her ears and forehead; her face was pale with a shining pallor, her mouth full and red, the cheek-bones rather high and the chin rather pointed though square of jaw: the contours were full of strange curves like the face of Leonardo’s St John, and the long eyes had the same look, half veiled, half penetrating. On either side her cheeks two

thick blonde plaits, the colour of pale wheat and the thickness of half a hand's breadth, came down to her waist. Her figure when she moved was like a quick succession of perfect poses. Her dress was the colour of the firelight, rather stained and faded.

Quite undisturbed by Armstrong's presence she went over to the sofa before the window, extracted a pair of shoes and put them on her feet in a leisurely way, showing, that she had left her boots in the passage. Her feet were fine and high in the instep. In stooping she turned her head over her shoulder, the two plaits hanging curiously to the floor, and looked at Armstrong.

'You won't mind there being no lamp,' she said. 'I persuaded Mother Lush it was much more peaceful to have only the firelight: and it was I who took down the photographs too. You will like it better yourself soon, I am sure?' She spoke a little questioningly, which made her voice slower and all the more charming. 'I always call her Mother Lush,' she continued, 'it sounds more homely, don't you think? Aren't you hungry? See! they have put the great tureen and that large heavy ladle in front of you tonight. I always feel like the man who tried to ladle out the sea when it is my turn.' She sat down with a slow, gliding movement, her dress falling into folds about her that made her look like some piece of mediaeval sculpture. 'I would rather have a wooden spoon and platter,' she said, crumbling her bread unconcernedly,

'and then one would forget this century altogether.'

He looked at her across the table, as she sat with her pointed chin a little forward, and the two blonde plaits falling straight on either side from under the little black cap. She reminded him of so many strange old things, that he felt it would not be difficult to forget the present century either. And yet he reminded himself that it was intensely modern of her to have said so much.

He forgot that he had made no response in ladling out the soup and observing her movements. She, too, did not seem to observe his silence, but turned to drop crumbs upon the black cat's head, smiling. When she smiled she was like a madonna, and when she bent forward she was like a tawny panther.

When the soup had been replaced by a savoury-smelling pie, she looked at

him again with her head on one side. 'Since I came here in the summer,' she said, 'I have seen such a lot of curious people and learnt such a lot of curious things. You would almost think a spell had been laid upon some of them to prevent their living. I did not think such people could exist now. There are some creatures just below the downs there, almost like creatures in a book, they are so unreal. But two of them are very beautiful. I like them for that.'

She spoke quite naturally, and as if she were sure that Armstrong would be pleased to hear anything she said. 'I came here in the summer to paint, and I saw one of them on the downs: he was like one of the old beautiful youths one hears about. I made him sit for me: he looked splendid coming out of the shadows in the great hollows. But he is very stupid when you talk to him, and tiresome too. I like the other better.' She reflected a moment, and looked up suddenly with her long, strange eyes. 'You are not an artist, are you?' she asked.

'No,' said Armstrong, 'I am looking for Druids.'

She laughed. 'How nice,' she cried, 'I like you for that!' and sat looking down sideways with her chin on her hand.

'The people don't know much about them now,' she continued, 'but there is still an old man, who cures the people with herbs, in a wood at the down-end. Mother Lush was carried there by her father when she was a child, and the man said charms over her until she was well.'

'Curious,' said Armstrong, watching her; 'then you are interested in old things too?'

'Oh no,' she answered, 'I am all for the future: but I like queer things—like that boy from below the hill there. Don't you feel pleased when you see a dead thing come to life? Only then it is so disappointing, for as soon as it comes alive it is often quite dull.' She paused. 'I shall not stay here much longer.'

'I wonder you were not bored with the place long ago,' Armstrong returned.

'So do I,' she agreed, 'but it was all so funny. Now it is no longer amusing I

shall probably go . . . soon. But I wanted to see the snow here first.' She looked at him speculatively, as if wondering whether he too were dead or alive, and then finished her meal in silence. When it seemed that everything had come to an end, she rose, pushed her chair neatly against the table and went over to the fire. There she warmed her hands for a few seconds, examining each finger in the twilight, and finally bidding Armstrong 'goodnight' left him to himself. He heard her go upstairs and then the sound of a window unlatched.

He sat down quietly to smoke whilst the servant cleared away the meal: and then, when there seemed likelihood of no more disturbance, he parted the curtains and looked out. It was brilliantly starlight, as though the sky had been pricked with a thousand dagger-points, and below the snow stretched up and down, only shadowed by the undulations of the slopes. There was not a sound anywhere, only an intense sensation of waiting.

Then presently he heard the sound of a little low laugh above him out of the darkness, and a low voice.

'Oh, you very silly boy,' it said, 'do please go home!'

There was no response.

'I shall get them to set the dogs loose soon,' it continued, and the low laugh came again. 'Now . . . please!'

A dark shadow detached itself from under one of the trees at an angle of the house and disappeared out of sight. It had the shape of Godfrey, but the stoop of Arthur.

Armstrong flattered himself he should have some news to impart to Ape's-face after all. And then he wondered suddenly how the night would pass down there, at the foot of the snow-covered slope.

X

Boots

WHEN ARMSTRONG AWOKE in the morning he thought at first that the snow had mounted to an enormous drift above the level of the windows, there was such a dense white blank beyond the panes and such a strange light in the room, hardly suggestive of day at all.

On further and more wakeful attention, however, he discovered that a thick mist or drifting fog had invaded the entire place, and now hung like some vast waving blanket on every side. It gave a curiously besieged feeling to the farm, as though it were surrounded by an invading force and cut off from the rest of the world. When he descended to the sitting-room for breakfast it looked singularly forlorn and sad; even the fire could not serve to cheer it.

The girl was down before him, warming her hands at the flame. The smooth hair on the top of her head shone like tarnished silver in the pallid light. It struck him that there was something studied in the carelessness of that air of hers, which seemed so oblivious of strangers about her, and yet afforded her more opportunities of displaying herself, opportunities also of observing them without the appearance of doing so. There was a want of spontaneousness which jarred, and yet it was difficult to find fault with anything so pleasing to the eye. He was beginning to value straightforwardness, even if it should appear in a less charming shape.

It seemed as if overnight the girl had decided that perhaps he was a little alive, or at least worth the revivifying process which she had described as interesting the night before, for her manner towards him was less impersonal and more pliant, as if she were willing to listen to anything he might say; the previous evening his own point of view had not appeared to need consideration. Now she sought it: whilst he on his side stiffened a little and felt disinclined to expand.

‘I’m afraid we are prisoners, for the morning at least,’ she said when they

were half through the meal, and without much sign of regret in her tones, ‘or do you think your Druids may like to come out in this queer-looking mist?’

‘Perhaps a disembodied spirit prefers this sort of climate,’ Armstrong replied; ‘what do you think? Supposing one of those old dead people were to come alive, what kind of weather would it choose?’

She put her head on one side, laughing. ‘That is just the kind of problem I like!’ she cried, resting her chin on her hands. ‘Not that I believe in spirits at all, not even one of my own. But last summer in all that red heat upon the downs here, it almost felt as if some queer thing stirred and began to live again. Yet still that would only be the commencement (like the way in which people give you a sudden look when first their interest in you is stirred; then perhaps it almost dies down again). Then perhaps it grows a little in the quiet warmth out of the autumn earth, and hardens with the winter to burst out in the spring. But no, you know, one great crashing storm at this time of the year, or the first piercing frost might suddenly start it into life, and it would rise up and awake in the midst of this mist. It would grow more accustomed to being alive perhaps in that way—it would be something like the mists of Death it had been wrapped in so long.’

Armstrong cast a keen look at her, but she was still laughing in evident jest: there was no after-thought or double meaning behind her words, no idea that the sort of thing she was describing could possibly happen. He rose and went across to the window where that dense pall of palpitating mist still hung. The curious current of receding and approaching gave it the appearance of hangings wavering in a draught—something which might be withdrawn and show strange things behind. It seemed impossible that only the bare snow-spread downs could lie untouched behind.

‘I think I shall go out all the same,’ he said, and the girl looked up with a quick kind of surprise.

‘Why,’ she returned, ‘you might easily get lost, or fall down the steep sides and break your neck—a cheerful prospect! or are you tired of life already?’

I shall wait until I am quite old, and then find some convenient precipice; but not till then. There is a story about two men who parted at the cross-roads

below, lost themselves in the fog, wandered about all night, and found themselves at the same spot at the same moment the next morning.'

'I shall keep to the road then,' he said and went out, glad to escape the awakening interest he appeared to excite in her venturous mind. He did not think he could call upon the Delane-Mortons until the afternoon, when he might perhaps explain his reappearance more satisfactorily, and at the same time show Ape's-face that he had not deserted her after all. Now he only meant to get nearer to the house, and see if by any chance there was anything unusual toward.

When he went out a thick drift of fog came in at the door, clouding the passage-way; it had a damp feeling like the laying on of clammy fingers. The trees in the avenue were spectral in appearance, their trunks showing vague and pale, whilst only now and then some of the topmost boughs would sway momentarily into sight on a slight withdrawal of the mist; still even this helped Armstrong to find his way to the commencement of the road. Once upon the bare chalk he turned to the left, and feeling with a stick along the grass edging he managed to walk at a fair rate in the desired direction. He knew that the ground trended upwards slightly to the spot parallel with which stood the Danish encampment; from that point it took a sharp turn and went downwards at a steep angle, being bordered on the right-hand side by the outermost fringe of the plantation. His memory of the trend of the ground served him in good stead today, for the usual landmarks in the landscape were as little evident as though he had been utterly blind. This groping method of procedure was extraordinarily subversive to his ideas. He found himself in a world where his wits, his senses, and his physical strength were really of very small assistance, and his progress entirely dependent upon chance. Anyone who has walked in a thick fog knows this baffling sensation.

As he crept downwards slowly through this world, which seemed like nothing so much as a kingdom of negations, tapping cautiously with his stick at every step, and keeping its point well to the fore, he became suddenly aware of someone or something approaching towards him. For a moment a kind of cold tremor shook him, and then his stick came into contact with an object of much the same nature; he drew to a full stop, peering eagerly through the mist. At the same moment a black figure began to appear

gradually, also bent eagerly forwards, until at length a pair of black eyes in the midst of a swart countenance made him aware that Ape's-face stood before him. The strangeness of their chancing upon one another in this groping and almost visionary manner kept him silent for a moment. She also said nothing for a little while, and they stood before one another like dark apparitions, their sticks tapping idly together against the grass.

‘My business . . .’ he began slowly, and then broke off impatiently. ‘The truth is,’ he said, ‘I could not keep away. I came back again last night and am staying at the Drylches. I intended calling upon you this afternoon to explain.’

She smiled and her expression looked pleasant as softened by the atmosphere which drifted past in pale wreaths. ‘I am very glad you did not come down to explain in the way you had intended,’ she returned, ‘I like the real way so much better. You cannot believe,’ she continued in a lower voice,

‘what a relief it is to see a stranger. I came out because the house had grown unbearable. All yesterday and last night were like a prolonged picnic on the edge of a volcano. Aunt Ellen and Godfrey have driven into Salisbury for her yearly outing, and as it is father's day on the bench I was left alone with Arthur. It is too horrible of me to suspect him, but I thought he kept on watching me in a curious way all the time we sat together in the library. He was pretending to read a book, but he had only turned a page at very long intervals. And every time I looked at him out of the corner of my eye I found he was looking at me out of the corner of his own. I bore it for half an hour, but after that it was not possible to endure it any longer. So I ran out here.’

He noticed now that she had only a black silk scarf twisted about her head. There was something forceful and fine in the mould and the pose; it gave essentially the same satisfying sense of shape and proportions as a well-grown oak-tree. Now that it had lost its truculent, assertive air it allowed the approach of more tolerant observation. He found that he liked to consider her.

‘You will certainly catch cold if you remain,’ he said in the most matter-of-fact voice. ‘Let me see you home.’

‘Must I go?’ she asked. ‘I really cannot find words to tell you how the thing

inside the house grows. The very pictures seem to have changed. And worst of all I feel changed myself. It was horrible how a kind of unreasoning anger against Arthur rose up in me when I saw myself observed in that fashion. I hated him ! Poor Arthur! It was really for his sake I came home too.

Do you think it will be tonight? Cannot you let us send for your luggage from the Drylches?’

‘Why? What could I do?’ cried Armstrong, the man of peace in him protesting.

She looked at him a moment without speaking, and then smiled. ‘Perhaps you would be angry if I said,’ she returned, ‘but you are like something funny at a funeral. You make one sane again.’

He laughed with her.

‘I will come into the house with you for a little if you will let me,’ he said,

‘but there is an attraction at the Drylches. I think I should tell you about her.

Yes, it is generally female, that kind. I do not fancy it to be dangerous; but simply I think it accounts for the scene at tea-time between your brothers.’

‘Ah!’ she said slowly, ‘so Godfrey does not tell Aunt Ellen everything after all.’

‘I cannot imagine Godfrey introducing this young lady to Aunt Ellen.

She is an artist, and enjoys the privileges which novelists of a certain class always conceive indispensable to the part. I thought you would be glad to know there is a real cause for rivalry; though as to the feelings of the lady herself with regard to your brothers—I do not think she has any. Besides, she is about to remove herself from your neighbourhood.’

Ape’s-face looked sombre. ‘Once Christmas is over,’ she said, ‘I shall be quite happy again—about them.’ The fog drifted a little backwards as she spoke, leaving the way clearer behind her; she turned her face in the direction of the house. ‘Are you coming?’ she asked. Again the fog closed down.

‘You had better take my arm,’ he said. She put her hand lightly upon it, and he could see the long, tense fingers close over his sleeve; then that too was blotted out.

It would, have been impossible to descend through the plantation, so they were forced to continue along the road and enter the avenue by the iron gates. They skirted the house, and instead of advancing to the front door passed to the back, and made their way in at the gallery-window between the strange wood-creatures. The gallery was dim with mist, and only the gilt picture-frames showed—as if they contained black canvases. Everything seemed wiped out except the extreme cold of the place and the penetrating odour, yet this time there was something more with it.

‘Do you feel anything?’ she asked in a lowered voice, for he had hesitated just outside the door of his former apartment.

‘Absurd,’ he said with a displeased laugh, ‘I had that curious feeling which comes to one in a crowd when one feels impelled to turn round and see who, out of all that multitude, is looking at one. Generally you find it is some old friend who has recognised the bald patch below your hat. Hardly likely here!’ He shrugged.

‘I know what you mean,’ she rejoined. ‘I felt it first last night. I think the others felt it too. We were all sitting round the fire pretending to read; and first father and then Aunt Ellen kept asking if someone had not spoken. If only you would stay tonight you would understand what I mean.’

‘Really,’ said Armstrong petulantly, ‘I am a modest man. You think too much of my powers as a protector against spooks.’

‘Very well,’ she said quietly, and at once he realised that he was occupying the position of most human beings before the incomprehensible—fretful and churlish. Her patient attitude struck him as being finely tolerant, and yet it annoyed him that this petulance was no surprise to her: she seemed to expect as much, but instead he would have preferred her to believe him incapable of pettishness. And all the while those blotted portraits gaped upon them both like blind eyes. Neither of them could be unaware of that pervasive

consciousness which flooded the place. The lead and stone work of the windows looked spidery and pale, the end of the gallery melted where floor, wall, ceiling were all involved in the obscurity.

‘I wonder where Arthur is,’ she continued calmly; ‘shall we look for him?’

He thought her voice sounded tired, and considered that she must be putting constraint upon herself to keep so still.

It was at that moment that a door opened down the passage, and the object of her remark suddenly appeared. He came very rapidly towards them, his face flushed with excitement, his hair rumped in every direction, and his fine brows scowling. Armstrong could not help noticing his extraordinary beauty even then. He came angrily up to his sister, and with a sort of laugh flung a pair of very worn and dirty boots at her feet.

‘There,’ he said, ‘that’s the result of all your suspicion! I saw you watching me! I knew you guessed what I was after! And I suppose you knew too what I should find?’ His voice continued rising louder and louder. ‘Just like a woman to come and gloat over you when you are down! I suppose you will say it is all I deserve for stealing. Go on. Preach away!’

She looked at him steadily with her mournful eyes and never said a word; she did not even look at the boots which had been thrown down at her feet.

‘I wish you wouldn’t glare at me like that,’ he continued; ‘and as to stealing—I suppose when the old lady is dead we shall all have some of her money, so why not have it now when I really need it? It’s impossible to stay in this place any longer—and as to curates! I’ll see myself hanged first. If father won’t help me I must jolly well help myself. Besides, it isn’t even moral to keep money hoarded up as she does—never spending a penny. You know it isn’t, everyone says so.’

She went on looking at him with that mournful, almost tender gaze, and gradually his voice lowered a little until it became propitiatory instead of defiant.

‘And really, you know, it ought to be ours already. Father always thought

cousin David's money would be left to him, but Aunt Ellen got it somehow instead. If only he had we should be well enough off now, and I could do what I liked. And Aunt Maria's diamonds. *You* ought to have had them. If you had you would have lent them to me. And that is just what I told myself when I picked the lock of her precious cupboard. I knew she kept something hoarded up in there. She wears the key on a bootlace inside her dress: I saw it fall out once, and you should have seen her hands grab at it. No, she hasn't any right to all those things. It is she who is the thief—not I!' He kicked the boots heartily. 'And then you see what I found. A pair of dirty old boots; an old hat with the crown bashed in, and a diseased looking feather hanging off one corner; and some sort of garment hanging on a hook. I felt them all over but there was nothing in them. You can see for yourself there isn't anything hidden in the toe. The old miser! I expect she keeps it all at the Bank! And I suppose I shall have to be a curate after all.' He glanced down dejectedly.

'Hanged if I will!' he cried suddenly, 'I'd rather starve than be a humbug like that,' and his white face flushed again.

'Were you watching for me to get out of the way all this morning?' she asked quickly, 'so that you might go and steal Aunt Ellen's diamonds?'

'You know I was,' he answered angrily, 'don't rub it in. You've as good as found me at it.'

'Oh, I'm so glad!' she murmured almost under her breath.

Arthur stared.

'And when you got them what did you mean to do?' she added urgently.

'Why, I meant to go straight off to London and begin work in earnest. I mean to be an artist one day, in spite of father and Aunt Ellen, and all of you!

But I don't know what you mean about being glad,' he added suspiciously;

'I shouldn't have expected a girl like you to say that kind of thing. It's all very well for me . . .'

She interrupted him. 'Never mind that now. How much do you want to get up to London?'

'Oh, as to the fare,' he began lamely, and then stopped. 'I suppose you haven't a fiver? I could manage on that for a bit, though it would not go far.'

Still, I believe in luck, you know . . . and then a friend has promised me introductions.' The last part of his speech was confused, accompanied by the reddening of his whole countenance.

'I can give you that,' she said sharply, 'and when will you go?'

'I meant to go this evening by the late train, after dinner. But . . .'

'You could catch an earlier one if you walked to Monckton over the downs,' she cried eagerly, 'and that would give you more time to look for a lodging for the night. The fog cannot last for ever, and besides, you know the road so well you could not possibly miss it.'

'One would say you were glad to get rid of me,' he said between surprise and dissatisfaction, pouting almost like a girl.

'Now you look just like Godfrey,' she retorted.

'Do I?' he cried; 'when I've been in London a year or so you'll see some difference. Get me the money and I'll be off. You can send my things after me.'

'Certainly,' she said, and went off obediently down the corridor as if it were his own money he had ordered her to fetch. The mixture of teasing, care-taking, of service taken for granted, which is the burden under which most sisterliness thrives, all this was expressed by the speed of her vanishing figure.

'Let me hear from you,' Armstrong said to the boy when she had gone, at the same time scribbling his address upon a card. 'I should like to see you again.'

Arthur shuffled his feet to drown some inaudible words of which it seemed he was half ashamed; then his eye alighted upon the boots where they lay

forlornly on the boards. They were heavy, clumsy contrivances of country make, the toes where they upturned aggressively tipped with metal on which the mud had become thickly encrusted. The leather was cracked and embrowned with age, and a large patch had been inserted at one side where the toe-joint had made wrinkles and split the skin.

‘Shall I take them with me as a keep-sake?’ he said, grinning. ‘Aunt Ellen is the kind of old lady you would always like to remember, isn’t she?’ He went to the glass door and peered through the panes. ‘Queer, isn’t it?’ he continued in a different tone, ‘that the one thing one would like to take away in remembrance of the place should be hidden utterly. I suppose it thinks I have seen it often enough—the old Down. You wouldn’t guess what a lot of different moods it has, and how it plays with one. It feels sad tonight. I don’t think it has ever felt so before. Although it is so hidden you can guess it is surging more than usual; perhaps just because it is hidden and can do as it pleases without being seen. The great powerful creature! If I could put all its force into my painting Michael Angelo would be tame beside me!’ He left a silence, his head pressed against the lintel; then he opened the door a little and the mist crept slowly through the opening. ‘Why, it quite pushes against you,’ he cried; ‘for all the world you would think the old Down was trying to say goodbye to me. Don’t be in such a hurry, old man! I’ll say goodbye to you all the way to the station, and mind you don’t let me lose my way on you, like the unfortunate chaps who wandered round all night in a circle.’ The mist curled all about him now, making his figure shadowy in the curious light; it drifted along the corridor towards Ape’s-face as she came again hurrying towards them.

Arthur took the money from her without a word, tucked it carefully into his breast-pocket, shook her heartily by the hand, and having bestowed much the same kind of farewell upon Armstrong, with a final kick to the boots, he was out into the mist and gone. The two remaining shut the door hurriedly behind him. For an instant his figure shewed dark on the heaving white expanse, then that also vanished, submerged.

For a moment Armstrong did not look at Ape’s-face, nor did he say anything. When he turned to her she was smiling a little with the downward turn of her eyelids which gave something sardonic to her expression.

‘I think that is safe,’ she said with a sigh.

Armstrong shrugged. ‘He might have thanked you,’ he said crossly.

‘I should have been quite startled,’ she returned, ‘no one has ever encouraged them to be polite where I am concerned, you know. It isn’t brotherly, is it?’

‘I don’t know, being a sisterless creature,’ he said, ‘but still I have seen polite brothers—and by that I suppose I mean people with some kind of considerateness.’

‘Consideration,’ she said, ‘is made for things decorative or precious. Only a really unattractive woman sounds all the depths of unkindness, instinctive and intentional.’

‘You are neither young enough nor old enough to be bitter,’ he returned.

‘Am I bitter?’ she answered him. ‘I merely thought my remark a truism.’

She stooped in speaking and picked up the boots, turning them over idly in her hand. The metal tips clanked harshly together. She rubbed one of her fingers along the worn edges and drew it slowly away: there was a dull grey stain upon it. He saw her look upon it ponderingly.

‘Do you see?’ she asked, holding it out towards him.

‘Do I understand?’ he rejoined.

‘The mud on the soles is quite damp, and yet they are locked in a cupboard of which only Aunt Ellen keeps the key.’

‘I do not understand,’ he said. They stood looking perplexedly at one another.

‘Must I put them back again? must I try to disguise the misadventure to the lock? what must I do?’

‘Certainly return them,’ he said.

‘In all my life I have never crossed the threshold of Aunt Ellen’s room.’

Must I now?’

‘Certainly,’ said Armstrong, ‘and I will wait here while you do it.’

She was away three minutes, he was measuring the time by his watch, as nature informed him that the hour for lunch was near at hand and he was anxious to be gone: yet at the same moment he had an understanding of the unpleasantness of her task. He felt a proprietary complacency in her since helping in Arthur’s evasion, and the complacency showed itself in the glance which greeted her return. It was plain that Ape’s-face warmed under this sympathy, hybrid though it were. She was shivering a little, and her long fingers clutched tremulously at one another.

‘I think no one will notice that anything has happened,’ she said in a low voice, ‘but oh! it’s such a strange room—so full of furniture, pictures, china, photographs, hangings, books—almost a pawnshop in feeling. There were two terrible stuffed owls that glared at me as I shut the cupboard-door. The cupboard was quite empty, just as Arthur described it, except for those dreadful old garments and the battered old hat. Even the torn skirt felt damp, and the feather hung down from the hat brim like something left out in the night’s dew.’

‘Anyhow, you feel safer now your brother is gone,’ Armstrong concluded benevolently, ‘and after all a damp boot is no great matter. May I call at tea-time?’

‘Please,’ she said; ‘but those boots have been used lately.’

‘You grow imaginative,’ he returned, and went away smiling.

XI

At the Window

ARMSTRONG HAD GROPED his way back to the Drylches through the driving mist-banks, to find his mid-day meal smoking upon the table, and the girl staring out at the grey world beyond the windows.

She did not so much as turn her head when he entered, but continued a tune she was beating out upon the leaded panes with the tips of her finger-nails.

The click of her nails upon the glass sounded unpleasantly prickling and malicious. Her supple figure, black against the grey, swayed to and fro with a sinuous, impatient movement.

Armstrong settled himself in a satisfied manner to carve the hot joint; the comfortable sanity of the thing, the suggestive odour of the savoury gravy established him firmly in his most complacent mood. Now he did not even harbour any wish to fly from the adventurous inclinations of his table-companion.

‘Join me,’ said he, ‘in the one pursuit in which the female creature can keep pace with the male!’

She turned her head round in such a way that only her eyes and the palely shining crown of her head showed over the curve of her shoulder.

There was something secret and rebellious in this concealment of the lower part of her face. She swung a little on one foot, ended her tune with a final and more malicious click of the nail, then came to the table and sat with elbows supporting her chin at the edge of the board. Her narrowed eyes contemplated him in an expressionless and impersonal manner.

‘What an unpleasant thing a meat-eating animal can be,’ she said at last;

‘it deprives him of all sensations and perceptions. . . .’

‘But it raises him to a state of beatitude which enables him to regard all human nature in a true spirit of charity,’ he interrupted her; ‘it makes him genial and conversible, forbearing, tolerant, gracious, a thousand pleasant things, in fact. Please observe how much nicer I am feasting than fasting!’

She smiled at him slowly. ‘Pleasanter to yourself perhaps,’ she seemed to say: aloud she said nothing.

‘Even the little motes of grease that float in the brown beams of the gravy, the smooth curls in the yellow fat, the shy gloss of the crackling skin—all these appeal to a higher and more aesthetic sense.’

She smiled at him again, and behind the opaque blue of her eyes he saw some strange thought flicker and go out into shadow once more. He carved her a slice and handed it with an elaborateness of ceremonial that befitted the esteem he half mockingly bestowed upon the occasion. The mockery excused his esteem, otherwise he felt his pleasure would have been blamable; and yet the girl’s smile accused him of poor play-acting, in that it was half earnest. He began to feel the hairs grown grey upon his head, the ponderousness of his body, the loss of elasticity in his ideas, his very talk. Yet it was not an honesty such as Ape’s-face owned which disclosed him to himself, but a covert and elusive secrecy that pondered on its own ends while it observed him.

‘How cheerful this dull day makes you,’ she exclaimed at last, her voice being particularly soft and tinkling, and for that very reason most expressionless. ‘It seems I should have done much better also to have braved the fog and gone upon the downs. Did you break your neck many times?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘I know the slope of the road.’

‘Or you might have knocked your brains out against one of the plantation trees,’ she added; ‘that is another end I had forgotten to imagine.’

‘I should hardly attempt anything so hazardous at my time of life,’ he replied. ‘Have you been spending your morning in devising some pleasant or speedy

means of escaping from existence?’

‘No,’ she said, ‘I have been trying a practical experiment in mental suggestion. Mere theorising is hateful. You men often accuse us women of selfishness, and obstinacy, and other perverted forms of will-power, don’t you? I intend proving that we are the motive-power of all sub-consciousness in the Universe. Wait and see! What I have done this morning will perhaps convince you. It may be that I even found your way home for you through the fog: who knows?’

‘That would have been very obliging of you,’ he returned, ‘but your theory suggests a danger—a fresh danger from your sex: in which case no woman should be left alone unless she is certificated “harmless”. How long must I wait to see the result of this experiment?’

She laughed at him maliciously. ‘This afternoon, this evening, tomorrow morning, or perhaps next year! But it is great fun,’ she said, ‘and the best of it is that I do not really care if it does not happen.’

‘In that case,’ said Armstrong, ‘I am very glad, for I feel inclined to do a little prophesying on my own account and inform you that the thing will not happen.’

‘Now that comes from Druid-hunting,’ she said; ‘but never mind, the last act crowns the play.’

‘I wonder,’ he returned, ‘if it is really safe to leave you alone all the afternoon to try more experiments?’

‘But I believe my work done already,’ she replied; ‘for your sake I could almost wish it might happen this evening, the result will be so very funny. It may be amusing to write plays, but it is far more amusing to make them happen—off the stage.’

‘For the composer of the plot, no doubt,’ said Armstrong.

‘And the spectators. I am quite public-spirited, for, you see, I invited you to impersonate the audience.’

‘I am greatly privileged,’ he rejoined, and forgot to give himself a second helping. All the time she spoke he was conscious of seeing the thought which lay behind her words; a new angle presented itself for the point of view, but an angle from which he was so little accustomed to do any kind of observation that he could not maintain the position continuously. He felt it adjusting itself, shifting, vanishing, and adjusting itself again, only to go once more through the renewed processes of disappearance.

He became bewildered and uneasy. In outward appearance he showed unmistakable signs of impatience and irritation.

She simply turned and laughed at him.

‘Oh, how you amuse me,’ she said, ‘I just love watching people.’ She rose from the table and returned to her occupation of playing on the window-pane. ‘Do you remember the second play you ever saw?—Knowing what wonders attended the raising of the curtain, waiting in the dark for the stage to light up and the excitement to begin, then the entrance of the first figure, a curious puppet, posturing and strutting preposterously under a hard glare of lamps and observation. It’s the expectancy, the impatience of those first moments I feel now! Oh, go on with your roast beef; it would bring the whole house down to see you. The audience must be first aroused at the stroke of an emotion common to them all; then you can stir them to the rarer and more subtle kinds at will. Do say you like my curtain! As a drop-scene it is inimitable, this curious grey veil with hints of something passing up and down behind. Bon Dieu! and there is not even an orchestra to disturb the illusion. I never found waiting so hard!’

Here she gave a thud upon the glass with both fists, and made her way to the door with the leisurely, panther-like swing of her figure which made every movement a changing posture.

Armstrong did not relish the idea of playing the preluding puppet of her show, and certainly it rendered his meal unappetising—stage-fare could not have proved more distasteful. He sought refuge from the feeling in a pipe and the notes which he had made on the Morton papers. But each time he made a movement he was supremely aware of its outward effect, the motion of his own hand upon the paper had its histrionic value, a something

detached, impersonal. This intolerable shifting of observation continued unceasingly until four o'clock, when he started once more for the house under the down.

This time he approached the front door with all formality, and made the usual due demands for Miss Delane. The butler, with true episcopal grace, received and answered his enquiry, and presently he found himself once more on his way to the drawing-room. That the place had not only gripped him, but taken him entirely to itself, was shown in the age-long feeling of familiarity with which he followed his conductor.

The sound of many voices proceeding from behind the door seemed to herald the delights of a tea-party, for the duo-monologue character of the family chatter when alone could never have risen to such an overflow of sound.

A lamp had been lighted in the room, but the curtains were still left undrawn and the unpleasant duel of aggressive artificial illumination and natural light dimmed, clashed about the occupants of the room in a distracting contrast of hues and colour. It gave once more that feeling of double vision which had already proved itself so distasteful to him. He could have looked at the scene from both points of view separately perhaps, but this segment of two angles in which both parts were contained and equal in value disturbed him beyond the strain of irritation.

Besides Miss Delane, Mr Delane-Morton, and Ape's-face there were now two elderly ladies of uncertain age, and one might almost have said uncertain sex, a younger woman, and a man of Armstrong's own age. They were dispersed about the room in various attitudes of eating. The talk still circled round the weather and bade fair to flow in that direction for some time; it had engulfed everyone except Ape's-face, who seemed isolated in the middle of both room and conversation by a mutual conspiracy of active neglect. Words wreathed themselves over and about her, but they never touched her at any point; it was like a lasso in the hand of skilled players, but in this instance the aim was to miss rather than to hit. All the same it was baiting of a sort and kind that would not have disgraced the more savage instincts of our ancestors. He remembered a time in his childhood when, playing with his ball, a troop of grown-up folk came and took it from him, tossing it above his head from hand to hand in a wide circle; whilst he, below them, ran

helplessly from one to the other trying to catch the stolen thing as it flew. The agony of the attained, now unattainable, the distortion of one's own invention, or the forcible appropriation of one's own right—all these had been part of his pain: and again he saw it repeated in the treatment to which the party of strangers subjected Ape's-face. He raged inwardly, impotently. The conversation was of that smoothly-rolling kind which affords no hand-grip, no foothold, and may be heard in every other man's house: it is so smooth indeed that it cannot be turned.

Seeing there was no help to be expected Armstrong resigned himself to such patience as he possessed and an observation of the company. In so doing he became aware of a certain strangeness—in the manner of the host and hostess which grew with every minute. Aunt Ellen, usually so meticulous in her attentions, showed a certain vagueness of glance which directed itself towards a point in the room which no one seemed to occupy and from whence no sound proceeded. Once or twice she addressed a pressing invitation for the partaking of more food or tea to the air, to which the rest of the party replied as with one voice, no one being certain for whom it was meant. Mr Delane-Morton, usually so mild and persuasive in tone, embarked upon a bitter tirade against pet-dogs, from which no amount of neighbourly assent could deter him; every subject seemed to contain a hidden reference to the grievous topic which no one but himself would have observed. He became almost abusive finally, and because every one took his remarks in perfect forbearance and cordiality of agreement he seemed to glower and become more pointed still. As there was no apparent reason for this obstinate attack on the canine species his guests gradually shewed signs of uneasiness and a preparedness to retire from the battlefield. Armstrong greeted these signs with relief. A dispersal of the party now began to take place, Mr Delane-Morton, Godfrey, Ape's-face all drifting away in the tracks of the departing until only Armstrong and Aunt Ellen were left alone in the room. Aunt Ellen sighed.

‘Dear, dear,’ she said, ‘why, I wonder, do people always bring their dullest friends to call upon one? I really think there should be a law passed against the exchange of bores—the unfair exchange I mean, of course: for if I had a dull guest to entertain I should certainly have taken her to see the ——s’ and she mentioned the name of the departed, ‘then I should have no reason to

complain of their bringing that exceedingly dull and unpleasing-looking little frump of a woman. Did you notice how impossible it was to get a word out of her? The four —s I could have endured, but that woman made one too many: and how could they squeeze five people into that very small brougham?’

Armstrong felt perplexed: he had only counted four strangers in the room.

‘Did she go before I arrived?’ he asked.

‘No, she was there all the time, unfortunately. I refer to the little old lady who sat over against the fireplace opposite me, and only shook her head whenever I asked her to have more tea or more cake. Extraordinarily bad manners I call it. People who stare at one should talk in order to excuse their extreme of attention.’

‘I really did not notice her,’ said Armstrong, more and more bewildered.

‘Her unpleasant face disturbed me also. Her eyes were so hungry: they would have devoured me willingly, I assure you; and yet they were curiously vacant and dim, more like glass marbles than living eyes. I was quite thankful when she departed with the other four. I really do think they should not take a woman like that about with them.’

‘Really, really,’ cried Mr Delane-Morton, entering at this moment, ‘it is quite intolerable—this new-fangled craze for every woman in the kingdom to carry a pet about with her. I cannot conceive what the country is coming to! Such extravagance! Such folly! At least let me open the windows, my dear Ellen; the unpleasant odour of the beast still seems to pervade the room.’ He bustled across to the windows overlooking the downs, and at once let in a powerful stream of fog.

‘My dear John,’ cried the old lady, ‘I think you must be a trifle perturbed this afternoon, for I cannot imagine to what animal you refer: and if there is any unpleasant odour in the room I am certain it is due to the scent that unpleasant friend of the —s’ used. Just the sort of thing a woman of that kind would inflict upon one.’

‘I do not know why you refer to the —s’ daughter-in-law as a *friend*,’

retorted Mr Delane-Morton pettishly; ‘she certainly is no friend of ours to bring an animal like that; and then to have the effrontery to sit and agree to all my most pointed remarks on the subject, without so much as offering to have it removed. No, no, Ellen; do not try to defend the young woman!’

‘I am not referring to her at all, my dear John, nor to any dog, for I did not see one. But I refer to that gaunt, yellow-faced old lady who sat opposite to me over against the fireplace, and refused *all* our hospitality and every effort at conversation. No, John, I do not think they should have brought her, and so I was telling Mr. Armstrong when you came in. And how they could squeeze five people into that very small brougham perhaps you can now explain, for I suppose you shut the door upon them. I suppose they did not put her to sit upon the roof, poor creature.’

Mr Delane-Morton gaped upon his sister.

‘My dear,’ he said, ‘I do not understand you; I saw no fifth person.’

‘And I saw no dog,’ cried Aunt Ellen acridly. ‘John, you grow almost foolish!’

‘Then how about this unpleasant smell?’ he retorted, puffing out his cheeks.

‘You are becoming indelicate,’ she returned, ‘but I am sure it was that unpleasant person’s perfume which she used.’

‘Indelicate!’ he snorted.

‘Yes,’ she returned promptly, ‘some times your language is almost coarse.’

‘Coarse,’ he repeated, as if too dumbfounded by the charge to make any retort or denial or defence: then gathering himself together: ‘Gentility is sometimes a cloak to vulgarity,’ he said with heat, ‘and I advise you to be on your guard, Ellen, or you will find people suspect your fear as a want of breeding.’

‘I, at least, have never pretended to be other than myself,’ she answered,

‘and I never have been ashamed of my name or birth.’

‘Do you choose to imply . . .’ began Mr Delane-Morton, and then broke off in an incoherent splutter, his large face purpling and shaking with agitation.

‘Oh, dear,’ she said gently, with a smile Armstrong thought particularly venomous, ‘I imply nothing,’ and she accented the penultimate word. Then glancing quickly round the room: ‘Really, Mr Armstrong, you must not mistake our family banter. John must not embarrass you. Between brothers and sisters there is not the same ceremony observed as between other relations.’

A look of positive hatred passed from brother to sister which Armstrong could not fail to notice: it came as quickly as a flash of lightning, and was gone as soon. ‘Relationship is a curious thing, I have often thought—a tie of whose binding-power you can never be sure. What makes on one side for the greatest sacrifices, on the other side manifests the basest ingratitude. But I am not one of those who think that sacrifice or benefits should entail gratitude.

I have never looked for it. I do not demand or even hope for it. If one of my near relatives were to forget any help, small or great, I may have been privileged to give I should not complain.’ She turned to her brother. ‘No, I should not complain,’ she repeated. ‘It is in the small details of life that the happiness of women is concerned, dear Mr Armstrong; and it is in these that most men are so blind to our needs. But we do not complain; only unfortunately our memories are against us; we cannot fail to remember. Yes, we remember. John, pray call Pym to carry me to my room.’

John obediently rang the bell, but beneath the ponderous curve of his face that new and inimical expression forced a way.

‘As to benefits,’ he said, ‘opinions might be found to disagree. Some people give to others what they would wish to have given to themselves, quite irrespective of the recipient’s desires.’

‘Some people are too foolish to know what is good for them,’ returned the old lady enigmatically but with the same veiled animosity.

Here Pym appeared in answer to the bell, and with Mr Delane-Morton's assistance she was carried from the room.

It was now nearly six o'clock; the mist had shifted a little and only lay lightly along the slopes; it had become transparent at the lower level, and only upon the heights its density remained unchanged. The window was open, just as Mr Delane-Morton had left it. Ape's-face was leaning against the sill. She did not move when Armstrong approached her.

'I wonder which of us is most insane,' he said; 'your aunt sees an old lady whom none of us has observed; your father sees a dog which, equally, was visible to no other eye. Have you seen anything that was not apparent to all the rest?'

She did not answer. The curious outline of her dark face showed clearly against the grey light, and he noticed her mouth tremble.

'One would naturally expect your aunt to have the more vivid imagination; but even that was limited to something in her own experience.'

'It was like a shadow of herself,' the girl returned slowly. 'Would one recognise one's own shadow if one met it? Evidently she sees no resemblance.'

'I shall be seeing the ghost of a tea-cup soon,' continued Armstrong, laughing, 'and the doppel-ganger of Pym. And yet . . . the smell is here right enough.'

'Don't!' she cried out suddenly, 'I can't bear it. It is the last day on which the thing is possible. It grows every minute. That even father and Aunt Ellen should see something unusual is proof enough. You cannot move about the house without feeling that the thing has nearly broken through. I'm so afraid,' she added after a pause.

'You afraid,' he said banteringly; 'why, I thought you never were frightened yet. It was almost the first thing I heard you say. There was the ring of truth in it, too. I did you homage for that.'

She looked up quickly and down again.

‘That is very different. Now I am afraid of myself. I believe the thing might take hold of me just as well as it might take hold of Godfrey or Arthur.

And I love them so! And yet I can picture myself doing it quite well. Creeping down the passage in the dark, and putting one’s fingers on his throat, one’s knees on his chest. There would be an added power to one’s hands, something one had never owned before. I . . .’ she stopped, shuddering. ‘Isn’t it horrible,’ she cried. ‘To think the place should be ridden by a curse like this at every hundred years! Brother killing brother or brother sister. I don’t know how to bear it.’ She raised a clenched hand and brought it down upon the sill heavily. A thin trickle of blood flowed out along the stone. Some roughness in the surface had broken the skin of her hand. She lifted it and the blood dripped on to the floor; in the stillness of the room they could hear it fall upon the boards. At the same moment both were aware of a curious motion in the place as if the atmosphere were suddenly stirred and intensified. The curtains beside them blew outwards, fluttering; yet there was no wind, no draught. Then slowly before their eyes they saw the blood-drops wiped out and disappear: and as they watched, the thin stream upon the window-sill was rubbed out also, with a strange movement which began at one end of the stain and erased it in a deliberate progress until no trace of the blood was left. They stared at one another across it with wide eyes. Ape’s-face lifted her hand to her mouth to staunch the flow. Armstrong snatched it roughly from her lips, and again the blood dripped down upon the polished boards, only this time thickly. Once more the same feeling supervened and the blood vanished, but more rapidly. The odour in the room was almost overpowering.

Armstrong flung the window open wide, and as he moved his hand across the frame it encountered some substance that was both smooth and damp, like a wet hand. Yet nothing shewed itself except space; and when he had withdrawn his hand from the neighbourhood of the window he no longer had the strangely unpleasant sensation.

For a few moments neither moved, but both watched the blood fall and vanish, like people listening to the ticking of a clock which counts treasured moments. Presently the wound was staunch of its own accord and the two

moved a little nearer together. When at last they did speak it was with voices involuntarily lowered. They both knew that the other had marked the occurrence and drawn the same conclusion.

‘You see why I am afraid?’ she asked.

‘Perfectly,’ he replied, ‘but you have forgotten that Arthur is on his road to London.’

‘Yes,’ she said hesitatingly, ‘I suppose I had forgotten. And yet, when I try to picture what he is doing, he does not seem so far away after all. Godfrey is still here, anyhow.’

‘True, but we will find a way to trick Fate, never fear.’

‘If only you were staying here now,’ she sighed.

‘I should not be of much use.’

‘You could at least lock us into our rooms.’

‘That you can do yourself.’

‘I can lock all the doors but my own.’

‘You can lock your own and throw the key out of the window.’

‘But supposing at the last moment the thing gripped me, and I could not do it?’

‘Impossible,’ he said sharply, ‘you are giving way already.’

‘No, no, indeed!’ she cried; ‘but if only you would promise to pick up the key I should feel most secure.’

‘It seems absurd,’ he returned, ‘but if it helps you in any way most certainly I comply. I promise. When do you propose that I should call for the key?’

‘We always go to bed at ten, Godfrey and father and everyone. Father sees

that the front door is locked and then I hear him go past my door to his room. I should think by eleven o'clock the whole household is soundly sleeping. At eleven o'clock I will secure father's door, lock myself in, and throw my key out of the window. My room is at the corner of the house, overlooking the plantation, at the extreme right of the gallery. One window is on a level with the gallery windows, the other, being round the corner of the house, faces the park. I will throw the key from the gallery side on to the path below; it is only five or six feet from the ground.'

'Then you are sure you will feel safe?'

'Safe, and so grateful,' she said gently.

'And in the morning?' he asked. 'One cannot suppose but that a trick of the sort would be noticed.'

'In the morning Arthur's flight will be discovered, and the whole affair might pass under one colour—evasion of prisoner, detention of gaolers and all!' She reflected. 'Things cannot be worse than they are.'

'Then I will call some time in the course of the morning,' he said benignly,

'and I am sure you will have nothing terrible to tell me.'

'How I hope you may be right!' she said very low.

'You are not afraid now?'

'I do not mean to be,' she answered, half evading his question.

'The room feels different already, doesn't it?' he added, anxious to persuade.

'The oppressive feeling has gone, it is quite peaceful, there is no strange odour. I will shut the window.' He drew the casement to as he spoke, and stood there for some moments speaking about indifferent things, until he was sure by the expression on her face that she was comforted and encouraged.

His sense of protectiveness towards her had grown since the afternoon. When he saw that she was really happier he fastened the window and began to draw

the curtains over the grey twilight outside. Doing so, he saw a woman's figure appear suddenly on the path which led to the plantation.

'Is that a right of way?' he asked, pointing with his finger.

'Oh no,' she answered, looking in the same direction.

'It looks like a tramp.'

'Yes,' she said, 'there are a good many about the downs. I suppose she found the way down through the plantation.'

'But she is going towards it.'

'Perhaps they turned her from the door and directed her this way.'

'An unpleasant-looking lady,' he said, 'and she should not wear that draggled feather. I wish tramps would act the part better. Why choose feathers, I wonder?'

'It won't be nice sleeping on the downs tonight,' she returned, 'and I do not envy even your walk to the Drylches.'

'The sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep,' he said in a would-be jocular tone, and bade her goodbye, feeling both paternal, fraternal, and generally effective.

XII

The Woman in the Tree

THE DREAMS OF ELDERLY PERSONS, if their own accounts may be believed, are self-controlled and unimaginative affairs, generally connected with the crucial matters of food or raiment.

Armstrong, having supped silently with the girl, had retired to his own room, and passed restlessly through a mild series of dream-adventure in this style—the cheapest kind. He was waiting for the half-hour before ten which should start him on his third journey that day towards the Hall. Three such journeys, and all, inostensibly, in the service of Ape's-face, concluding with a pre-midnight appointment! What a hero, what a heroine, and what a romance, he laughed drowsily to himself, recalling a remote and somewhat tenuous experience of his youth as contrast; and yet it was an episode that had the glamour of reality upon it.

The windows of his room were low and grated, latticed and commanding a wide if shortened outlook upon the trees and sky; through the torn curtain of the mist he could see a frail starlight and the skeletons of branches. Where before it had been invading and aggressive, the mist now stood somewhat withdrawn and quiescent, hanging very still and grey upon the atmosphere at a few yards' distance from the house. His chair faced the light and the lamp at his elbow cast a luminous glow upon the pale expanse. The whole outline of the attic stood reflected on the mist like a charcoal sketch rubbed at the edges.

He lay at the borderland between sleeping and waking, where you can suggest the subject of your dream, and then allow it to take its course. The way of remembrance suggested his dream now, and half-actor, half-spectator, he passed back through thirty years into the presence of his first real attachment. The sentimentality and the self-pity which return with later middle-age coloured the moonlight shadows of the lawn and creeper-hung windows of his dream-house, mingling and interweaving themselves with the

reality outside the farm. He saw the dark smoothness of the dream-lady's little head move into view within the window-frame. The scent and fragrance of the night which went up like incense was the breath of jessamine; it always hung about her person, he remembered, and long afterwards the least suggestion had the power to startle him. She had lighted the candles of her table, and had paused to look out into the shadows where he stood concealed.

Her young shoulders rose out of the soft outlines of her bodice, all smooth and curved and fragrant too: he suddenly remembered the frock, a white thing like the froth on a waterfall (thirty years ago they wore draperies bunched up behind, and falling like a young cascade). Not a line of her perfect head was disguised (thirty years ago they dressed their hair quite plainly). He let her move about the room, luxuriating in the sense of watching her once more. A very pretty girl, he apostrophised her, and the lad in the bushes down there was worshipping her very shadow. Yes, it did the lad some credit that he had the taste to admire her somewhat classic beauty.

'Helen, thy beauty is to me . . .' The boy had moved out from the bushes, and come on to the lawn below the windows. There were lights in one or two of the other windows of the house, but at the far end, notably from her father's smoking-room. He would only be able to speak to her in the lowest voice; her sister's room was next door too. He was alternately brave and full of tremors. 'Lo! in yon sheltered window-niche how statue-like I see you stand!'

The young ass quoting Poe! apostrophised the dreamer. But certainly a very pretty girl, worthy a better quotation and a less callow admirer. The expectancy upon her name once uttered was pleasurable and painful at once; all the fragrant under-current made rejoinder. Helen had not heard. The lad could not see what passed in the room above, neither, of course could the dreamer.

Then suddenly she was at the window, little dark head with candle-light on shining braids at the back. He spoke her name again, only somehow it would not come quite clearly. His tongue was clumsy with joy and pain. Curious how differently it sounded, almost like some other word. Ella! no, certainly not Ella: and yet he had repeated it. No, it was the same as in Poe's poem. Try quoting while she waits listening. If you are not quick she will go again,

you young fool! quoth the dreamer to his young self on the lawn. 'Ella, thy beauty is to me! . . .' Fool! quoth the dreamer once more and more violently.

The jessamine scent seemed to faint and vanish at his anger, the very house appeared to shrink and the colour pale—the rich colour of old brick in pallor dismayed him. He moved uneasily. The lad on the lawn was still gazing up at the shadowed face gazing down. He tried a third time to speak her name.

The moonlight fainted, too, and he shivered. A voice behind him spoke the name he had evoked already twice, but had not meant to say. 'Ella!' She stooped her head from the window, it came nearer and nearer, it changed in a curiously inexplicable fashion—a fashion that was mysterious and terrifying to dreamer and the lad alike. For now he was completely in dream, where actor and spectator are merged in one. He tried to move from the face that neared his own, he was frozen and could not stir. Horror was cold upon him.

He feared to look at the dark face, and shut his eyes. And at that Armstrong awoke. From the window he could see the same expanse of dark grass, the outlines of a house, the framework of a window; below the window a man's figure, and in the frame-work the dark head of a girl. All just as in his dream, and yet all altered. He himself was cold enough, that was certain anyhow.

'Ella,' said the voice outside. The shadowed head bent from the window and laughed. (Helen, the real dream Helen had only whispered.)

'Is that you?' she said. No one in a dream could have said that. Armstrong knew now that he was wide awake.

'Yes, I, Godfrey,' said the voice outside.

'Oh, Godfrey,' repeated the voice of the girl half mockingly.

'I want to speak to you.'

'Why didn't you come this afternoon—when I wanted you?'

'Did you want me?' he cried eagerly.

‘Not specially.’

‘But a little?’

‘No.’

‘You just said you did!’

‘Did I?’

‘Yes, yes. But can’t I come in?’

‘The door is fastened, I expect.’

‘Ella!’

‘Well?’

‘One word at the door; I won’t cross the step.’

‘At the back door then.’

‘Any door you please!’

Again she laughed, that panther-like creature with the Leonardo mouth, the travestied Helen. Armstrong shivered. They had ceased breeding his kind of woman nowadays; you did not find the kindness, the simplicity, the fineness, the honesty. . . . The thought of honesty gave him pause; for at least he had met that in Ape’s-face. Glad to be out of the house which had contrived to affront his dearest recollections, he put on a hat and coat, and went out into the unfriendly night. As he passed the sitting-room a clock struck the half-hour after eleven. He would be unpunctual at his appointed place.

He had closed the front door softly behind him and stepped out into the drive towards the avenue, when he suddenly saw a man leap out of the shelter of the trees and come running towards the house. He ran with his head down so that the light did not strike his face. So running he nearly collided with Armstrong; their shoulders brushed, and for one moment Armstrong had a glimpse of his features, then he had vanished round the angle of the wall

towards the back. The man was the image of Arthur.

Armstrong paused, uncertain whether to return or proceed, then he went on. He would tell Ape's-face and she should decide upon their course of action. How could he be expected to make a final decision at so short a notice? He hurried towards the avenue, then came to a sudden stop, his mouth agape. The first tree in the line had appeared to move and suddenly become alive; it made him fear for his senses. Curled up between the projecting roots and the brown moss, which proclaimed a vanished limb, a shrivelled face gazed out at him from the shadows. The ancient hues of her dress combined so well with the weather-worn bark as to seem identical, and the warped and withered outlines of her body had everything in common with the wind-tortured trunk. Time and weather had moulded these two creatures into semblance of aspect and form; one seemed as little human as the other.

The woman would have looked like some hideous growth of merely vegetable production if it had not been for her glinting eyes; they were not bright but dimmed, like glass marbles or beach pebbles when the sea is off them. Her face was bowed almost to her knees so that her chin rested on their sharp edges under the ragged clothing. The thick heavy boots on her feet shewed underneath the frayed skirt like knots in the root on which she sat. She looked at Armstrong and blinked witlessly, but with a certain malignity that made him walk on again as quickly as could be, with a passing impression of withered lips smiling over toothless gums.

He went at a good pace down the avenue, stumbling now and then over roots and fallen branches but still making good headway, and over his head the bare boughs swung and clattered in a heavy breeze with which he prepared to make battle when he came out on to the open downs. On the open downs, however, there was not a breath stirring; the place looked more empty and vacant than he had ever known it.

The mist having drifted somewhat off his path he prepared to descend through the plantation and so reach the house by the way that cut elbow-wise across the front of it. The fir-trees dripped heavily with moisture on either hand as he went, great pale beads of sweat that shone under the stars.

There was a sufficiency of light to make his footing easy. In these trees there

was no motion.

As he drew near the fringe of the plantation a kind of dread at seeing the house in this night aspect suddenly overtook him; and when he had shaken that off the absurdity of being seen under Miss Josephine's window assailed him wildly. At his age too ! And then all at once he found himself emerging under the gaze of all those shuttered windows along the frontage. All were fastened except those in the gallery and one beside it. The house looked singularly like a discarded mask, conveying a notion of meaninglessness and disuse; it had none of the awesome and suggestive feeling which he had expected, and in which all his former experiences of the place would have confirmed him. He struck across the grass where the snow had melted in patches, and came close down under the shadow of the walls, taking always great care to step very delicately. There was no sound but his own footsteps, and no movement but his own. His eyes were bent attentively on the path before him. so that he could not possibly miss the key, in whatever direction it might have been thrown: and it was not one of the least surprises which startled him that evening when a voice spoke not more than an arm's-length away, calling him by name. He did not mistake the voice.

'Miss Josephine!' he cried.

'I've been waiting for half an hour,' she continued breathlessly, 'and not knowing what to do.'

'You must make up your mind now, and quickly too,' rejoined Armstrong;

'both your brothers are this moment at the Drylches: if they have not met it will be a providential matter, and not that girl's fault either. I came to tell you as well as to rescue the key.'

'Why, that explains everything then,' she cried, 'and there isn't one moment to lose.'

'So I should suppose,' he said, 'and you can tell me what has happened as we go.'

She drew the thick cloak she wore across her shoulders more closely round

her, and pulled the hood over her head. 'I doubt if any one in the house is waking tonight, it feels stiller than a tomb,' she said; 'it was partly that which roused me.'

They went quickly back across the grass, making wider tracks beside the old ones.

'Well,' said Armstrong, 'what happened after I left ? You had better take my arm through these trees, or you may fall down over roots, and that would delay us.'

She put her hand out obediently. 'It was not until dinner-time that father made mention of Arthur; he was very vexed when he noticed his absence, and questioned me. I said that Arthur had been with me most of the morning and had gone off for a long walk before lunch, saying he would not be home until the evening. For once in her life Aunt Ellen defended Arthur, and suggested that the fog might have delayed him. The idea did not seem to soothe father; oddly enough he became angry with Aunt Ellen. I had only seen him angry with her once, years ago. In consequence we were all very silent after dinner, and she went up earlier to bed than usual. Godfrey soon followed, and then father and I were left alone. He was a good deal disturbed and walked perpetually from one end of the room to the other, sometimes going to the front door, sometimes to the gallery door, to hear if Arthur might not be coming. At last he came in and sat down beside me, asking quite gently if I thought Arthur was unhappy. I could not say anything but that I thought so. 'If your mother had lived——' he began; 'but then there is always Ellen,' he said. After this he said he would have the gallery door unlocked in case Arthur should arrive, but that he should not wait up much longer. We sat on either side the fire for yet another half-hour. Then the clock struck the half after ten. He got up, bade me goodnight, and having lighted my candle (he never has done that before) we went upstairs. I heard him go past my door to his room, and then the house went quite silent. I sat by my window for some time waiting. I had always fancied there was a curious expectancy in the air about Christmas for days before; but tonight there was nothing of that, only a queer sense of movement throughout the house. I was almost afraid to go out into the passage. So I told myself how you would be expecting me to do all we arranged at the window this afternoon. So first I

went down the gallery to Godfrey's door, and waited outside a little to hear if he were moving. As I listened there certainly came no sound from inside his room, but far down the gallery I could make out a noise like the rapid indrawing of breath after breath, that seemed to suck up the air like some sort of draught. I had never heard anything quite so strange before, and it puzzled me. Besides, I did not at all like the idea of returning in its direction, as I knew I must do to reach father's room. However, having turned the key in Godfrey's door, I left it in the lock, and crept back again, being very careful to keep as much in shadow as possible all the way. The starlight shone in through the windows, but I remembered there was no moon. And always as I crept forward I looked carefully about to see if there was anything to show what could be making that strange noise.

'Though I saw nothing, it continued, making a peculiar rumour in the place that seemed to sway the walls and the entire fabric of the gallery, and yet one could not precisely say that anything moved. It was only that one seemed suddenly aware of the transparence in everything, and of the certainty that ether flows round every atom. This thing seemed pulsing through the other. But it is hard to tell you at all what one means. At last I came to father's door, and I turned the key also in his lock, leaving it there. The queer pulsing motion was still evident as I made my way back to my own room, but I could not rest until I had looked once more down the gallery to try and explain it to myself. As I stood at the turning just outside the guest-room, the air seemed suddenly drawn away from me, and sucked together in one long breath, so that I fell against the wall as if all support and strength had been taken from me. At the same time I saw a movement in the gallery that corresponded with the sound; and yet I could only describe it to you as something like the body made by the eddies in a stream.'

'I don't understand you,' he said sharply.

'It comes in the end to be a permanent body, although it is always flowing, because it is made of a thousand small movements which will be running perpetually in that one pattern. And the pattern is the same in the scales of fishes and the feathers of birds, something winged and pointed, something swift like flames and just as continuous. It flowed there in the gallery under the star-light, and yet seemed to gather volume every moment so that the

pattern was knit closer together like the meshes in a net tightly drawn. That gave it the appearance as of the covering to something behind. It surged against the walls and the windows like a thousand hands beating about—

no, wings, not hands. Then suddenly the door on to the slopes gave way, opening wide, and the thing swept out of the opening, drawing the air after it, and if it had drawn all that was in the house with it, and myself besides, I should not have been surprised. I leant against the wall for some little time afterwards, and then went back to my room. Until presently I heard a clock striking in the hall I forgot about our plans and the danger we feared. For myself I was not in the least afraid. The house seemed sweet and full of repose, as it never had been before. It was whilst I sat rejoicing over this that suddenly I became aware of its reason. The thing, in leaving the house free, had got out upon the downs; so that our peace was only other people's menace. I determined to speak to you about it. What you tell me explains all.'

'Perhaps it may,' he said, 'but there is a very practical side to the issue of this night's work.'

'Of course,' she returned, 'one would expect nothing else. But why doubt my side?'

'I do not doubt you, anyhow,' he replied, and at that both fell silent.

By now they had got to the edge of the plantation and come out upon the wide downs. Ape's-face paused for a moment.

'Do you feel how quiet it is here too?' she asked in a low voice. 'The Christmas peace is quite undisturbed. I wonder which way the thing went.'

'At least it leaves no horrors in its track,' he rejoined, and urged her on with a pressure of the arm.

Now they hurried again until the avenue rose clearly into sight.

'Fifty minutes,' said Armstrong, looking at his watch, 'and that is time enough, Heaven knows!'

They were now almost running, and arrived at the end of the avenue in a somewhat breathless condition, to find that most of the windows in the house were lighted up, and a general air of life was apparent in the place unusual at such an hour. It was at this moment that Armstrong stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder.

Ape's-face, arrested perforce, glanced at him impatiently.

'Why do you stop' she cried, releasing his arm on the instant.

'When I passed before,' he answered, starting on again, 'there was a horrible tramp under the tree, glowering at the house like a witch. She has gone, you see, and I am inclined to think her part of a dream.'

'A tramp!' Ape's-face repeated, 'what was she like?'

'Like the tree itself,' he answered, 'brown and withered.'

'That's no description,' she said sharply, and seemed about to ask for a better, when they arrived at the door. She put her hand on the latch at once and pushed past Armstrong into the passage. Coming close upon her heels he could see over her head into the parlour.

Both fire and lamp were alight, so that the entire room was visible. Ape's-face had evidently seen something there which caused her to enter, for she crossed the threshold without a moment's hesitation. Standing in the doorway he could now see that 'Ella' stood by the hearth. Without flinging back her hood, Ape's-face approached the girl, who did not at first hear her footsteps.

In a moment more, however, she did look up and recoiled with a little cry.

'Where are they?' Ape's-face demanded in her queer, harsh voice.

The girl drew still further back with every sign of repugnance.

'I don't know who you are or what you mean,' she said fiercely.

'Where are my brothers?' Ape's-face cried, now pushing back the hood so that her swart face shone clearly in the firelight. The contrast between the two

women could not have been more clearly marked as they stood eyeing one another.

‘Oh,’ said the other, her face settling into a composed smile, ‘I suppose then you are Miss Delane-Morton; but I do wish,’ she added pettishly, ‘that you would not come in upon one in that abrupt way. It is the fourth time tonight I have been badly startled, and if anything more happens I shall scream.’

‘I don’t want to frighten you,’ said Ape’s-face more gently, ‘but can you tell me where my brothers have gone?’

‘First,’ the girl continued quite unheeding, ‘there was your brother Godfrey under my window, and then there was Arthur round the corner like a burglar, and then there was that awful tramp woman in the tree when Mr Lush rode away after them. I think you down people are the queerest I have ever met.’

‘They were both here then!’ cried Ape’s-face again; ‘and now where are they? And why did Mr Lush ride after them?’

‘Oh, there was quite a scene,’ she began composedly, but at something in Ape’s-face’s expression she paused and became somewhat confused. ‘I really did not mean to make mischief,’ she looked in the other’s eyes and again halted; ‘at least not such mischief,’ she amended, reddening. ‘They began quarrelling, and then they both ran out into the darkness, and then . . .’

‘But which way did they go, and how long since?’ cried Ape’s-face desperately.

‘Twenty minutes, or half an hour, perhaps more. I don’t know. They went out through the yard at the back. I sent Mr Lush after them on his horse; he was just going to bed. He said the mist was thick that way but . . .’

‘Can’t you shew us the direction?’ Ape’s-face insisted, catching her by the arm. ‘They may have murdered each other by now.’

The girl began to laugh, but again something in the face before her changed her demeanour. ‘You don’t mean that?’ she said on a note more of curiosity

than belief.

Ape's-face nodded. 'I do indeed,' she said; 'will you come?'

The girl looked at her strangely, hesitated a moment, then, 'This way,' she said, and made towards the passage.

'You shall have my cloak,' Ape's-face cried, and threw the thing across the other's shoulders. It was dark in the passage, but they could see that the door at the back still stood open, and that the mat at the threshold was tossed aside and much trampled.

The three crossed the yard together in silence.

'You can't see far for the mist,' the girl said, 'but it sounded as if he went this way,' and she opened the gate which led on to the downs behind the farm. She passed through and they followed.

XIII

Brothers

AT THE GATE THEY ALL STOOD for a moment listening, to hear if by any chance the noise of horses' hoofs could be distinguished in that intense silence. But any sound which the night might have revealed the mist had hidden. Everything seemed embraced and absorbed by the heavy veil which lay across the country before them. They could only see the ground at their feet quite faintly. The snow was slurred and smirched there with the trampling of men and the hoofs of horses. Armstrong pointed them out to the two women.

'We follow those,' he said.

After the gate had been passed the marks on the snow became less confused, displaying themselves across the downs in some sort of ordered sequence, which yet puzzled the party who followed. For the marks of one horse's hoofs went parallel with another's, as if they had ridden side by side the whole way along. And this scarcely tallied with the girl's account of the violent quarrel which had taken place in her presence between the two brothers. Armstrong turned upon her as they went.

'I must ask for a more detailed account of your quarrel,' he said.

'Must you?' she returned insolently, 'have you enrolled yourself among this band of maniacs too?'

'You had better take care what you say,' Ape's-face said suddenly. 'I think you have been playing with things that are bigger and more dangerous than you can imagine. Don't you feel the downs tonight are different? Don't you feel there is something strange abroad?'

'Yes,' the girl returned reluctantly, 'but I'm sure I never brought it there: don't you try to saddle me with all the blame . . .'

‘I don’t suggest such an idea. It would not be a person like yourself to move the powers behind Nature. They move themselves, and we get caught in the undercurrent if we are not careful. You think you willed Godfrey and Arthur to meet here this evening. You thought it would be an amusing sight to watch their chagrin at seeing they had been fooled at the same time, by the same woman, without either of them knowing the other’s secret? Well, I tell you there were other forces plying in the same direction. It was like following the workings of an old mine, really. I daresay you were not even the tool. You are only a symbol of something much vaster, much more cruel, much more passionate.’

‘Oh, as to passion,’ cried the girl, ‘I haven’t any! Your brothers interested me as curiosities. I wanted to see the little marionettes work. That’s all. Godfrey has often come round in the evenings to sigh under my window; it began in the summer, when it was still quite pleasantly warm at ten o’clock. But I never let him in. Arthur only came in the afternoons. I used often to wonder if they would clash; but they never did—until this evening. They are such innocents—I beg your pardon—but they are! I thought it was time they learnt a lesson. They are not so fascinating as they think, beautiful though they be! Arthur may be in years to come; but he will be slow in forming.’

‘Then this was the first evening you had admitted Godfrey?’ Ape’s-face asked.

‘The very first. He was so silly, I wanted to laugh at him; and besides I was hoping—expecting Arthur. He would have formed a chaperon, wouldn’t he, quite properly?’

Armstrong stopped for a moment and examined the ground closely.

From among the medley of horses’ hoofs the prints of a man’s feet now disclosed themselves quite clearly—not the whole foot, but just the fore-part, as though he had been running. Armstrong pointed this out to Ape’s-face.

‘That would be Arthur,’ said the girl. ‘You see, I had hardly opened the door and led Godfrey into the sitting-room . . . indeed, I was just poking the fire to make a nice blaze, when suddenly I saw a queer shadow move across the room, and there was Arthur standing on the threshold glaring at us. They both

looked at one another for a few moments, and I laughed, it seemed so very comic. I asked them to shake hands and sit down, as we were all mutual friends. Then they began to be very rude to one another; they took no notice of me. And then Arthur threw something at Godfrey, and Godfrey flew at Arthur's throat. It looked horrid. Arthur made such a queer gurgling noise.

After a moment or two he got free, and tried to get away, but Godfrey got hold of him again. They swayed about and knocked over the furniture, and I thought of calling for help. Then all of a sudden Arthur cried out:

'Good God! he'll murder me!' So then I did call and no one answered. It was very horrible though, for I thought I heard someone laugh in the passage.

I hid my face a moment. When I looked up again Arthur had freed himself a second time and was making for the door. He looked at me as he ran, and though I was terribly afraid of Godfrey I tried to stop his following. I tripped him up with a chair. It gave Arthur a moment or two more to escape. Godfrey swore at me as he picked himself up, and I almost fancied he would turn on me; but after hesitating a second he dashed out of the house after Arthur. I screamed and Mr Lush came down. It was then he went out to the stables and saddled his horse.'

'And the woman in the tree?' asked Ape's-face.

'I ran round to the front of the house to see which way they had gone, and when I came to the trees it seemed as if one of them suddenly moved. I thought madness had come upon me. Then suddenly I saw it was an old tramp-woman crouched on the roots of the tree. She had no teeth and no hair; she appeared to have no eyelids either, they were so sunken under the protruding brows. She grinned at me with her horrid wrinkled lips, and mumbled something. She looked like the Death in Holbein's dance, with a bedraggled feather hanging over one ear. Dreadful she seemed.'

'How monstrous!' Ape's-face cried under her breath. 'I must go home again and see . . .'

'Nonsense!' said Armstrong, 'you are losing control of yourself. For Heaven's sake don't get hysterical. We must find your brothers before

everything else.' He caught her by the arm, for she had already turned round in the homeward direction.

'Perhaps you are right,' she said faintly.

The mist thickened in front of them, the ground sloping downwards.

They had evidently come to one of those hollows where mists cling longest and most densely. It was difficult to discern the tracks, difficult to keep a firm foothold even. They were cold and blind and helpless. Ella began to whimper a little. The noise of her whimpering was particularly distasteful at that moment: it suggested all things that are weak and false or easily overcome. It brought the power and greatness of the downs into still stronger contrast.

They were forced to stand together there in that fine fold upon the slope.

They could not see, either for going forward or coming backwards. Armstrong surmised that they must have come to the dip in the land where once the old river ran. On the opposite slope would be the ancient cattle-track scored roughly along the hillside. They waited. The mist fluttered slightly. There came a small sigh of wind. No more. Again Ella whimpered. The mist fluttered to the point of lifting. The ground became clear. Armstrong stooped and saw that here all three tracks separated. The man on foot fled straight on, one horse bore rather to his left, the second horse diverged still more upon that side. He and Ape's-face debated which course to follow. Ella prayed to return.

She was utterly unheeded.

The long silence, and the cold night breeze through it, the undulating land desolate under snow—all these held them at bay. Then as they waited, under the mist came a dark shape towards them—a man on a horse. He nearly rode them down.

'Who is it?' cried Ape's-face sharply.

'And you?' returned the voice.

‘Josephine Delane-Morton,’ she said.

‘I’m Lush,’ he replied, ‘and I can’t find those brothers of yours anywhere, ma’am. The mist came down on me and I couldn’t follow their tracks any longer. Let’s hope they have gone and lost themselves from one another too.

That’ll cool their hot blood soon enough. It seems one of them took a horse out of my stable. Didn’t stop to saddle him either.’

‘Which would that be?’ Armstrong asked Ape’s-face quickly.

‘Godfrey,’ she said, ‘Arthur cannot ride.’

‘Coming home along then?’ queried Mr. Lush.

Ape’s-face answered sharply. ‘No.’

‘Take my horse then, miss,’ he said, ‘or the gentleman here could ride it.’

He dismounted as he spoke, and slipped the reins into Armstrong’s hand.

‘I shall go home with you, Father Lush,’ whimpered Ella.

‘Right you are, miss,’ he said obligingly, ‘it’s no night for people what don’t belong to these parts, and not much for them either.’ With which he offered her his arm, and the two departed into the mists together, leaving Armstrong and Ape’s-face alone with the horse between them.

‘I cannot ride,’ he said.

‘I can,’ said she, and swung herself up into the saddle. She had no covering upon her head, her hair had escaped from its pins, and hung loose about her neck and ears. There was something free and fine in the carriage of her head as she looked down at him. ‘And now which way shall we go?’ she cried.

He shook his head.

She looked straight through the shifting veils in front, and he could see her nostrils quiver, like the nostrils of a hound scenting a trail. Her eyes were

closed.

‘Straight ahead then,’ she said; ‘don’t you smell the thing?’

‘No,’ he replied.

‘We shall be following Arthur.’

‘That’s eastward,’ he said, consulting his compass.

She looked somewhat impatient. ‘Go by the compass then,’ she said.

‘It leads to the old stone,’ he returned, justifying himself.

‘Of course,’ she cried, ‘where else?’ and then suddenly: ‘Come! Quick!’ and was off into the mist as though she had seen something not far away.

Armstrong ran after her. She could not go fast down the incline, and he soon caught her up.

‘Take hold of the bridle,’ she said, ‘and hold on to my stirrup when we climb the other side.’

He saw her face grown pale above him, and felt his hands go cold.

‘Can you see anything?’ he said, low.

‘No,’ she replied in the same tone, ‘but there is something coming up the downs behind us, coming from the west eastward. Do you smell nothing now? Do you hear nothing?’

‘No,’ he said again, panting at the steepness of the climb.

They had evidently come to the top of the encampment, for now the ground went fairly level beneath their feet. It must be that portion of the way which led straight to the ancient fortified place in its triple row of trenches.

They felt their way cautiously, as quickly as might be. Now and again the horse started, pricked its ears, and swerved. Armstrong caught it firmly by the

bridle. It grew more and more restive at every step, jerking its head, and whinnying. Suddenly Ape's-face pulled up short. He turned round and looked in her face: it was quite ashen, the nostrils quivering, the mouth set: only her eyes were calm and clear, there was no sign in them of fear.

'Hold tight to the bridle,' she said in a whisper, 'I feel it coming.'

Armstrong was suddenly overwhelmed with the horror which he saw she felt. If her eyes had not been sane he would have thought her mad. He himself felt nothing but dampness of the mist and coldness of the night air.

He held the bridle with both hands.

As they stood there in a tense group the low sound of wind whispering came from far behind them; it gathered in volume, growing rapidly; it swept across the downs in one furious outburst, rending the veils of mist from right to left. It slashed at them, and cut them through; it howled and shrieked, and passed in a moment. The obscurity hung in white helpless rags and tatters, leaving the downs stark and black under a fierce starlight. They saw the wind sweep far along over the dark country, tearing the mists as it went, making an avenue of utter desolation, and in that avenue an awful peace. They stood and looked upon the thing with wide eyes.

Again Armstrong felt the ancient horror brooding on that place, again the waves of darkness clutched to overwhelm him, and yet again the great plains swelled and heaved with that antique pain. The iciness of death passed across his body. And in that moment there came clearly across the Downs the sound of an extraordinary onrush. It was not like the sound of the wind, though it was just as swift and strong; it had almost the sound of running feet, beating upon hard stone; and yet it was like one footfall multiplied into a myriad. It was the noise of some body in motion the like of which no one had ever seen. It was a sound quite inexpressible, because the thing itself was unknown, unseen, untold. It passed them in a flash and was gone eastward before they could draw breath. Almost it might not have passed, it was so strange and unbelievable that the senses refused it credence. Yet it left behind that queer odour, which had hung about the old hall, and a sense of horror that was unmistakable. The horse itself bore witness, with wide-distended nostrils, and eyes rolling wildly, the whites dilated horribly; in every limb it quivered, and

its coat was damp with sweat. Armstrong found that he was clinging stupidly to the bridle with both hands.

‘Let him go!’ Ape’s-face cried hoarsely in his ear. He tried to leave go and could not, he felt he was gaping upon her. She struck the horse with her heel, it trembled but did not move. With a sudden movement she was on the ground, and running wildly towards the encampment. Under the stars Armstrong could see the great hump of the embankments showing dark and firm—black and grim. It was not more than a hundred yards away. They had come farther than he thought. Just for a moment his activities seemed suspended, he could only watch. Then, pulling the reins through his arm, he went quickly after her, the horse following meekly.

The sides of the trenches were too steep and too high to attempt with the horse, so he left it at the outermost circle, and descended them as quickly as possible alone. Ape’s-face was already at the top of the third and last enclosure, he could see her figure stand out for one moment under the stars, before she descended again into the innermost ring. The eeriness of the time and place grew upon him as he too climbed and descended those three enclosing circles: at every step the horrid odour intensified, until it became nauseating and turned him giddy. He felt his power of action flag under its attack. If he had paused then, he would have fallen. He scrambled to the top of the earthwork, and as he came, scream after scream burst piercingly upon his hearing.

It hardly sounded like the cry of a human being. The very stars seemed to shrivel to mere dagger-pricks at the sound. The sky appeared to draw away from the ground in horror. He tried to use his eyes, to lift his eyelids—they felt unutterably heavy.

He was standing looking down into the centre of the circle. The place where the ground had sunk with the stone’s removal lay full and clear in the light from the stars. It was fifty yards from him, but he could see everything plainly from the height at which he stood looking down upon the scene.

There, in the patch of starlit grass, the two men whom they had pursued so long struggled together. Their faces kept coming, turn by turn, into the light as they writhed and fought in one another’s arms. Now one, now the other

seemed uppermost as they sought for a grip at the throat. They had no weapons—that was evident—but they meant to kill none the less. It was written hatefully on the face of either. They had never looked more alike, never more hideous, or more beautiful than now. He could hear the sound of their heavy breathing, it came to him in great sobs. He could not tell which of them had screamed. And he continued standing there, unable to move, just a spectator.

Ape's-face had come rapidly across the open space, and stood on the verge of the struggle. She too seemed waiting. He could not guess what it would be possible for her to do. Then suddenly the scream came again. It was Arthur who screamed. He remembered the sickening sound of a rabbit caught by a stoat; it had screamed so, but less terribly a thousandfold. Godfrey seemed to be crushing him backwards to the earth with all his force: he saw the face come first, pressed down, horribly contorted, then the throat, white, strangely protruding. Armstrong himself cried aloud, and leapt down into the ring. The whole place seemed full of a sickening, reeling throng through which he could scarcely breathe. He saw that Arthur lay along the ground now, fallen across the cavity where the stone had rested long ago. For a moment he lay at his brother's feet, motionless, lifeless, whilst the other glowered at him with eyes distended, and with a ghastly hatred. Only for a moment: then he prepared to fling himself again upon the fallen man. But in that moment Ape's-face threw herself between: she cast herself along the body of her brother, her face upturned to Godfrey, her arms outstretched along the grass. Lying so, she covered, shielded him. Godfrey's rage did not seem to abate even then. He fell upon her. Armstrong saw with horror the red blood flowing from her nostrils. He sprang upon Godfrey and clutched him from behind. For an instant the man resisted, then slowly he relaxed his hold, and staggered backwards upon Armstrong's shoulder.

There was a great rumour and confusion throughout the circle. The atmosphere seemed to contract and change. Again Armstrong was aware of that curious readjustment of angles, the tilting of consciousness as it were, and the view of a new perspective. Across that, and arising out of the blood which flowed from Ape's-face, there slowly emerged the strangeness of some inexplicable form.

It drew together in a curious flowing pattern, like the eddying of water under a bridge, scaled, feathered, he scarcely knew which. It was not on the air, or in the air, it seemed rather to be through and of it all. Her blood seemed to flow into this shape, transforming it to the semblance of something human.

A kind of body seemed to clothe itself upon this thing. It rose into the air, as it were up-gathered. A countenance, blind, blended of nameless expressions, came into view for one moment and seemed to fade again. It left an impression of extraordinary strength and beauty, mingled with a certain charity or grace.

The eye seemed unable to hold that impression. Only the mind kept its image, as of something at peace after warfare, smiling and released. The three of them saw this thing. Then suddenly the great rushing sound filled both length and breadth of the downs, and the winged creature had fled westward down the avenues of night. They watched it go and vanish in the darkness.

Ape's-face from her knees had risen to her feet. She turned to Armstrong.

'This is not the end,' she said, and then: 'Oh, God! give this poor earth a little rest.' She was silent a moment. 'How should we catch it, or arrest it on its way? I do not think it can do harm any more. Let us go home.'

XIV

Animated Dust

MEANWHILE THERE SAT on the stump of a tree in the mist a little twisted, distorted body that kept mowing and mouthing to itself; and inside the body sat a little twisted, distorted mind, mowing and mouthing to itself also. It was only a little animated dust. It was full of glee, this small thing, following out itself to its own logical conclusion.

It had looked on crookedness all its life, and what it had desired that it had desired crookedly. It lived in a world where possession alone was power, and possession the end of desire. What it owned, it owned secretly: what means it used towards ownership had been secret and tortuous too. It had used its own will to bend that of others, and in bending them it had grown bent itself. From a live being, from body and soul, it had become now no more than a little animated dust.

It is not so much to be blamed at its conclusion as at its beginning, when deliberately it set itself to go awry. It is certainly a thing of horror, being something not quite human in a human form. A thing to haunt one's dreams at nights, a thing the mind could not forget even if it would: it must not forget this symbol of all crookedness.

When it gets off the stump of the tree you can see all its gnarled and twisted little body; the ugly clothes it wears twined about its limbs: the battered hat, the draggled feather, the, misshapen boots. It has a strange way of walking too, and as it goes it dances grotesquely to its shadow on the mist.

It has never walked in anything but the dark for years: it has never seen its shadow by any light but the moon or stars. But at the end it has grown tired of concealments and wearied of restraint. So to free itself it has thought to bend greater and stranger things yet to its own ends, greater and stranger than ever it has tried before.

It has felt the growth of a power outside its own poor world, has listened to the talk of others concerning it (the power), both when they spoke in public or quite privately so that eavesdropping was required for the listening.

It has desired to use this new power for personal purposes, misunderstood and twisted the force from a beauty to a crime. So ugly is the gnarled creature that in ugliness it sees no slur on fairness.

So it passes on through the cold, the mist, the snow, capering a little as it laughs. It comes down across the empty downs in their silence, and on through the plantation to the old house under the hill—the old house which has been its desire from the beginning of life in this animated dust.

All the windows in the house are blindly shuttered, but the door which should have been locked is too evidently open. They shall mind her house better in future. She goes to the door, opens it and enters in. On the threshold she takes off her boots, goes back into the garden and buries them in a bush under one of the windows. They will not be needed again. The times for night walking are nearly run.

The house is utterly peaceful. It is almost Christmas—that time of good-will and peace. You can feel it through the very mist to the stars. But the old creature gropes her way down the quiet corridors, feeling the walls as she passes, and the doors of the rooms. They are all locked. She knew that she would find them so. She knows, too, that all but one are empty. The key is in the lock; she turns it ever so softly, and goes in.

Asleep in the old four-poster bed lies a fat old man, snoring. He is the most unromantic object possible to be found in such a romantic setting. He never was fit for the place in which much crooked scheming placed him: he had only been aware spasmodically of either the scheming or the place. She has never hated him so much as now, when the contempt of years needs no longer concealment.

She laughs a little as she scrambles lightly on to the side of the bed, contemplating him briefly with her chin on her hunched-up knees. The breath comes thickly from between his toothless gums, his teeth lie in the glass at his bedside. The bed is so large and she so small that her presence does not at

all disturb his sleeping.

There are two pillows on the bed: his head rests only on the one. She can see all this clearly, her eyes being well-accustomed to the dark, and besides a pallid light comes in through an uncurtained window. She draws the unused pillow swiftly from its place and covers his face with it, pressing it tightly across his mouth. At first there is no movement; but then there comes a little struggle: his body heaves. She throws herself across the pillow. But for all that there is a tumult in the bed. She feels he is escaping even now from under her hands, from beneath her body, and yet she feels a strength within her that must fight him still.

He has disentangled himself from the pillow, but the sheets encumber him, and in the dark he can scarcely see what happens. He only feels the horror of two claw-like hands squeezing, squeezing at his throat. He drags her off the bed still clinging to him; his one idea is flight, space to put between him and this awful thing. He reaches the door, they come out into the passage. The place has grown clear with starlight, the walls and floor are chequered with the patterns of those leaded panes; and on that ground of curious lights and shadows they struggle breathlessly together. She clings to him with hands, arms, knees—she is all about him.

And then suddenly there sweeps across the downs outside the great onslaught of a terrific wind; it bursts open the door between the carved wood-creatures, and rocks the pictures on the walls. As suddenly as it came it goes. In the ensuing peace still the two struggle.

The walls seem to waver and part, the patterns on the floor rise and flow; there is a gigantic sound of running feet, of some great body passing. The air is gathered together in its going. The strugglers are caught in its flight.

The clawing hands fall apart, the clinging creature gives way and sinks to the ground limply, the battered hat and feather crushed beneath her on the floor. Just a heap of dust, twisted, wrinkled, meaningless. No animation here, no horror. This is the end.

The old man runs screaming down the passage like a child.

‘And she clutched me with her knees!’ he cried, ‘she sat on my bed! I saw her! She has no teeth or hair; but she walks! She will run after me and catch me!’ and so he goes calling down the stairs, shrieking and crying. The dust lies still behind him: it is soon laid.

XV

Christmas Eve and an Obituary Notice

SURRENDERING TO A CONVICTION that new feelings require an outward expression in changed surroundings, the library windows were left unshuttered, the curtains undrawn, although night had long ago descended upon the land. Slow, heavy flakes of snow could be seen falling against the panes, tickingly, with the steady precision of sand dropping in an hour-glass. The fire being piled high with logs shone brightly. There was a just and pleasing sufficiency of light, such as suggests comfort and quietude. The room seemed in some way to typify the ideal ending to a long and cold journey.

Without any conscious rearrangement the furniture was grouped quite differently; though everyone had gathered round the fire there was no rigid circle now, for they had come of their own volition, and the result was consequently more harmonious if less symmetrical. The two great chairs now sat beside one another, elbow to elbow; but in Aunt Ellen's place sat Ape's-face, and Mr Delane-Morton's hand rested perilously near her knee—perilously, that is, to those who look with suspicion on the outward shows of affection. Godfrey and Arthur lounged comfortably in chairs that before had invited occupation but elicited no overt response. Armstrong watched them all from the other side of the hearth in a contented wonder.

'My dear,' Mr Delane-Morton said confidingly to his daughter, 'do you know, I think it would be nice—quite nice—if, on this evening of all others when we like to think most kindly of everyone—for I take it that we all think that Christmas is intended for such a purpose—yes! it would be nice to write out the notice—the obituary notice of your poor aunt which must go to the papers. Not that it can be a long notice such as celebrities deserve; though your aunt was quite as extraordinary a woman as any celebrity. I always remember thinking that, and so did your poor mother. It would be best to write a rough draft in pencil, and then we can all make suggestions.'

Pencil and paper were brought by Arthur.

‘And the *Morning Post*,’ his father amended, ‘we must not be ostentatious, nor put in one word more or less than is considered fitting on these occasions.

I have always admired the fine, the real English reserve of our . . .’ he paused a moment and swallowed something, ‘well, our death-columns. Nothing marks the civilisation of nations or persons more than their scale of values as regards reticence.’ He cast his eye along the first columns of the paper. ‘I begin to see how it is done,’ he said softly and with a sort of reverence, at the same time poising his pencil ready for writing, ‘we begin with the surname: that shews the great respect bred in every Englishman for the great principle of Family Life. Then we have the Christian name or names. Thus—Delane, Ellen Josephine. Somehow it always comes over me as odd that she should never have been Morton, when she had almost more than their own pride at heart. Your poor mother remarked upon the fact once or twice just before she passed away; she said quite a remarkable thing about bequeathing a place to Ellen which she felt herself to have usurped too long. I cannot exactly remember how it went, but it was almost witty. Your poor mother was witty once or twice in her quiet way, but to my mind her remarks lacked a trifle in point. However . . . next the date, December 23rd; but no! it must have occurred after midnight. I remember running down into the hall, and then you all knocked upon the door. I seem to recollect our shouting at one another. But it was Pym who opened the door after all. “I beg your pardon, sir,” he said, “but you will catch cold standing near the door in your light attire.” Did anyone look at the time?’

‘It must have been about four o’clock,’ said Ape’s-face, ‘although the mist had lifted we came slowly home across the downs.’

‘I cannot yet understand what you were all doing out there at that singular hour, although you have tried to explain it to me twice,’ said Mr Delane-Morton pettishly.

‘Well, the truth is,’ said Arthur hurriedly, ‘I was going to London by the evening train from Monkton, but when I got half-way I remembered they had knocked it off for the winter, and that there was not another until eleven o’clock. So I thought of looking up an artist friend of mine who was staying

with old Lush. I lost my way once or twice in the mist and then it got dark.

I wandered about all over the place. It was the worst night I have ever seen.

I was making up my mind to spending the whole night out on the downs, when I suddenly found myself on the high road to the Drylches again. I thought of asking old Lush to put me up. It was just then that the mist cleared up a little and I saw an old tramp woman on the road before me. She was coming in my direction. I didn't like the look of her somehow. She spoke to me as I passed. It made me hurry on. She turned and followed me. I didn't like that either.'

'What did she say?'

'Oh, something. I don't quite remember what.'

'Well, and then?'

'Then I went on to the Drylches and found old Godfrey talking to my friend. I didn't like something Godfrey said, and then we had a bit of a scrum, and he chased me over the downs. We got lost again, and then old Ape's-face came along and found us.'

'It's very odd,' said Mr Delane-Morton, 'how all my family seem suddenly to have acquired this habit of rambling about the downs without my knowledge. And Godfrey knew this artist person, too, did he?'

'The fact is,' replied Godfrey hurriedly, 'I liked the fellow, but knowing that you did not care for that sort I did not want to distress you, sir.'

'There's something I don't like about this,' rejoined Mr Delane-Morton judicially. 'Now, Josephine, did you know this person also, this artist fellow?'

'We had just met,' replied Ape's-face reluctantly.

'I thought as much,' he cried, 'all women are alike. A little long hair, a sad look, or a large tie attracts them sooner than mere worth. I thought there was more in this than met the eye. Do you like this fellow? and further—does he

like you?’

She hesitated and looked across at her brothers.

‘No, no,’ cried her father, ‘your brothers shall not shield you! You must tell the truth. I will have no philandering.’ Then turning to Armstrong: ‘I understand you have been under the same roof, sir, as this fellow for two nights. How did the situation strike you? You are a gentleman, sir; pray give me your opinion.’

Armstrong hesitated: he knew Ape’s-face wished to shield her brothers.

‘Ah!’ said Mr Delane-Morton sadly, ‘then he *is* all I feared. My dear,’

turning to his daughter, ‘believe me, you must give up all idea of this unprincipled fellow. I value my child too much to throw her away upon a waster. You are your father’s only comfort now.’ He took her hand.

A suppressed sound from Arthur broke the silence. Mr Delane-Morton looked up from his air of parental solicitude at the disturbance.

‘My boy,’ he said, ‘I thought I heard you laugh. You should be old enough to understand the seriousness of the affair.’

‘Oh, but old Ape’s-face! It’s too funny!’ cried Arthur in an agony of incompletely controlled laughter. ‘Oh lord! I can’t help it. You must know the truth, father: the joke is too good to be missed. The artist isn’t a man—she’s a girl. Godfrey just called her a fellow to show how friendly he was. He is more her friend than I. I never did care for her very much—too much of the minx for me!’

‘A girl!’ cried Mr Delane-Morton, falling back in his chair.

‘It’s not true, sir,’ said Godfrey quickly, ‘she was Arthur’s friend before ever I met her. It was she who gave him the notion of going off to paint in London.’

‘A girl!’ repeated Mr Delane-Morton breathlessly ‘then the point of it all is . . .’

‘The point of it all is this,’ cried Ape’s-face, interrupting him, ‘that both these boys ought to be hard at work instead of idling about here. The Delanes always were workers, and there must be a considerable amount of good energy going to waste.’

‘The Delanes!’ cried her father, ‘the Delanes, my dear!’

‘Yes,’ said Josephine, ‘the Delanes. And we ought all to be thankful for their energy and what was once their enterprise. Look at Aunt Ellen. I liked and admired her. Even when she was ill, and she must have been paralysed at least half her life, she had the power and the energy of a man. The doctor said this morning when he came that it could only have been quite recently that her bodily strength returned. See how she accumulated money. It was a mean way; but she did it. All of us, younger generation that we are, ought to be applying all our strength in some way or other. Let Arthur be an artist if he likes—skill of hand combined with imagination. Godfrey would make an excellent motor agent. It’s a great gift to make dull things sound fine; and the system of wheels and screws and such should be in his blood.’

Godfrey looked up a little scared. ‘Good Heavens!’ he said; ‘but on the whole I do not mind the idea.’

‘Well, well,’ sighed Mr Delane-Morton, ‘if it would keep these girls away.

But I suppose there might be girls about motor-works. Still, we might try, eh?’

‘The carriage for Mr Armstrong is at the door,’ said Pym’s magisterial voice from the distance.

There was a general upheaval, and an outburst of farewells. Armstrong had decided to curtail his visit at the Drylches, and his baggage had been sent down in the brougham which was to carry him to the station—finally this time.

‘Josephine is taking a parcel for Christmas to the woman at the Lodge,’

said Mr Delane-Morton; ‘she will drive with you so far.’

The whole party accompanied Armstrong to the door and stood upon the steps to see him go. The world was extraordinarily white about them and the sky white with stars over their heads; its lustrousness was like the sheen of lily-petals new unfolding. The soft crackling of frost, so like the chirping of grasshoppers, was the only thing to disturb the quietude. The old horse and the still older vehicle looked like some immovable giant toy stranded in the snow. Ape’s-face got into the carriage and Armstrong clambered in beside her. Mr Delane-Morton waved his hand, Pym shut the door as if he were fate closing her sealed books, and the equipage lurched heavily upon its way.

‘This is unexpectedly good,’ said Armstrong immediately, ‘there are things I want to hear you say, and things I want you to hear. They have all been talking a great deal in there, but it is only you who have the right explanation; just as it is only you who will guide that household now.’

‘You have the real explanation too,’ she said, ‘it is a case of your truth and mine, against all their untruth and folly.’

‘What is the moral of it all, I wonder?’

‘I was thinking,’ she returned, ‘that each one of us is a moral in human clothing.’

‘So this has been a Christmas Morality Play, after all’s said and done. But I would rather not apportion the parts.’

‘It is the Return of the Five Wits to their Senses, I think,’ she rejoined, ‘and the release of an imprisoned spirit. I like to believe that the old gods were converted at the first Christmas-time, and became angels. The old people must have had some such idea, else why do you find so many churches dedicated to St Michael the Archangel near the downs—that is, near the sites of so many more ancient holy places? The old spirits were not really cruel till men made them so.’

‘And shall you never reveal the existence of that curse to your father or brothers?’

‘They would never understand. They would see in it either too much or too little. Besides, it is gone now for ever. I am sure that ancient spirit rejoices to be freed from the curse just as much as we ourselves.’

‘I daresay,’ said Armstrong shortly; ‘but there is one thing I should like to remark, and that is, your curse has always had its natural obvious explanation as jealousy, greed . . .’

‘Of course, of course. Man always suffers through his own nature, or where is justice?’

‘That way saneness lies, anyhow. I’ll quote something from a speech written not so long ago. It was spoken by an eminent person to warn his audience against pseudo-science, and “the theory that the divine supernatural order occasionally broke in to subvert and alter the laws of Nature.” He said 120

that “people took too much refuge in gaps that science had not yet filled, and he would like to remind such people that they were likely to be in a tight place when the gaps were filled.” What do you think of that?’

‘It sounds common-sensible, it admits of truth, and it allows for development—by his leave.’

‘And, by your leave, you could not have defined your own character better. But that is personal. I beg your pardon.’

‘That is the privilege of friends and enemies.’

‘Then I’ll lay claim to both kinds, and say I’ve guessed the moral you stand for. It’s honesty.’

‘Please,’ she broke in, ‘we are nearly at the gates, and I must say goodbye.’

She put her hand out to lower the window. The strap had not been mended, and it vividly recalled to Armstrong their first drive.

‘Then if that is not your moral, what is?’ he persisted.

‘I don’t know. I only know I care a great deal about them all. . . .’

‘Then it’s charity!’ he cried triumphantly.

‘When I was young,’ she said with a sort of laugh, ‘I always liked everything about moral stories except the moral: it seemed so dull. I suppose that is why so few people like me. Goodnight and goodbye.’

‘So you are going to leave me just where you left me before?’

‘Just to finish the circle.’

‘Please to remember a circle has no ending—which would be my definition of real friendship: a ring which has no beginning and no end. And that means I shall come back again very soon. May I?’

‘Whenever you like.’

‘No; that is not the answer, I want.’

‘What shall I say then?’

‘Whenever *I* like: say that.’

‘Whenever *I* like.’

‘That is better. And it will be soon, please?’

‘Quite soon.’

‘Then I’ll let you go now, into the dark again.’

‘I don’t fear the dark!’ she cried, springing out, and the door shut upon him.

The words sounded strangely with something of their old force, and something new besides. Armstrong nodded to himself, smiling. All around the whiteness of the snow defied the night.